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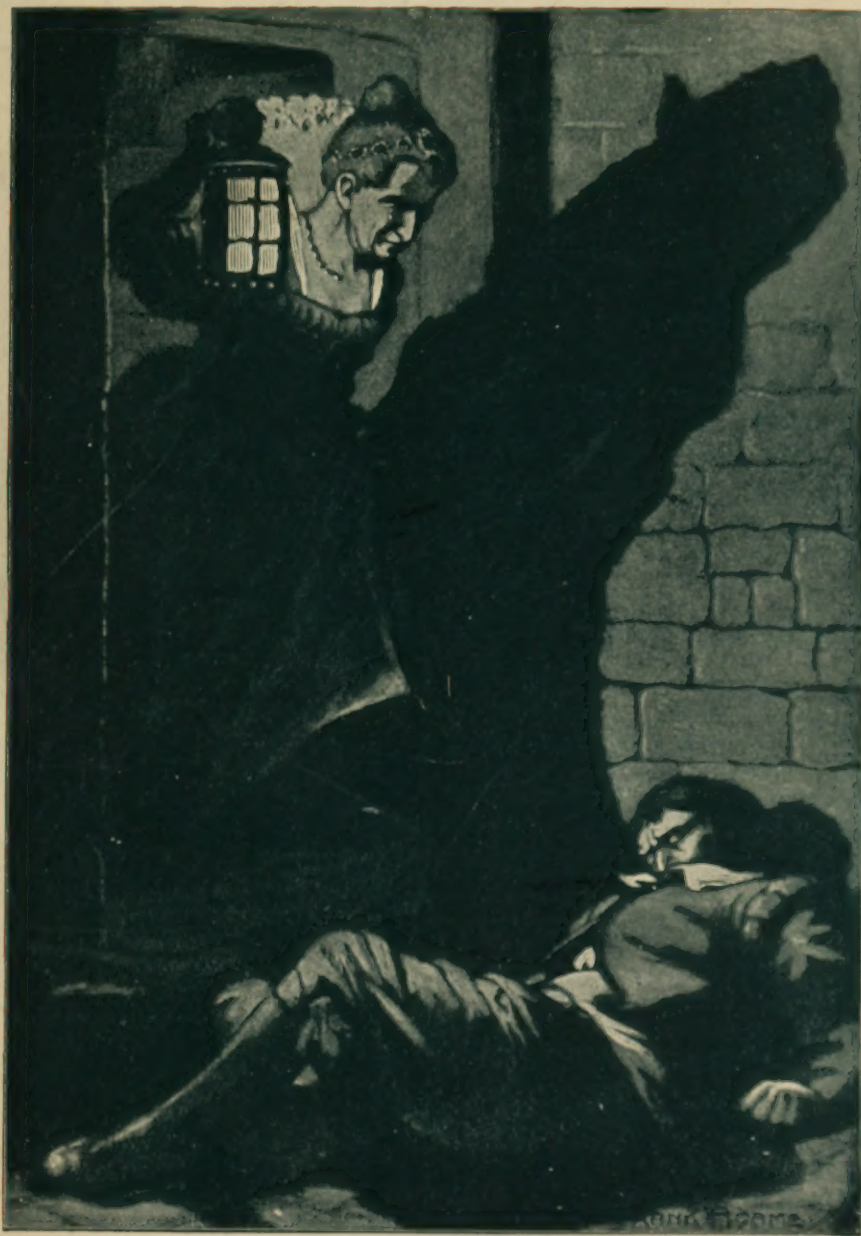
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BY ALEXANDRE DUMAS

HENRI DE NAVARRE
BEING PART II OF
QUEEN MARGOT



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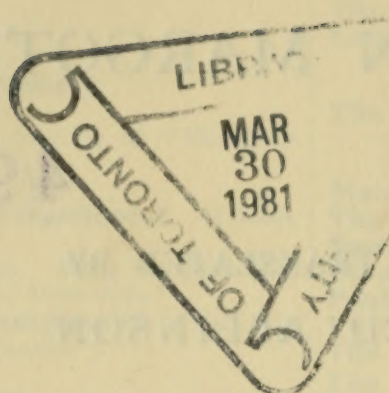
BEING PART II OF
QUEEN MARGOT

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NEWLY TRANSLATED BY
ALFRED ALLINSON

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INTRODUCTION

DUMAS, who invented so much, claims to have invented the *roman-feuilleton*. This he did as early in his career as 1836. The occasion was the founding of the journal *la Presse*, his contribution to it being the historical romance *La Comtesse de Salisbury*. The other papers quickly adopted this plan of publishing novels in instalments, and by 1843, when Sue's *Mysteries of Paris* was appearing in the *Journal des Débats*, the popularity of the system had become immense.

Then commenced a great struggle among the rival editors, a struggle which resulted in all the leading novelists being pressed into the service of the *feuilleton*. Dumas wrote *The Musketeers*, *Monte-Cristo*, and several other romances simultaneously.

On December 3rd, 1844, *la Presse*, which was owned by Émile de Girardin, published the first chapter of Balzac's novel, *The Peasants*. To it was prefixed a dedication, which contained this sentence: "During eight years I have a hundred times quitted, a hundred times resumed this book, the most important of those I have resolved to write."

Three days later the following announcement was inserted: "*La Presse* commenced on Tuesday, December 3rd, the publication of *The Peasants*, scenes of country life by M. de Balzac. In the course of the month, and immediately after the first part of *The Peasants*, *la Presse* will publish *la Reine Margot*, by M. Alexandre Dumas."

The Peasants, in fact, far from being read with interest, had brought to the editor's letter-box expressions of disapproval, nay, even threats to drop subscriptions. And Girardin, afraid to face the dreaded December 31st, on which day, it must be observed, subscriptions for the ensuing year fell due, had had to promise a romance by the author of *Monte-Cristo*, and not only this, but to publish before the close of the year the first chapter, breaking his contract with Balzac by so doing.

The first instalment of *la Reine Margot* duly appeared on Christmas Day, and the bored readers of *The Peasants*, which had stopped a few days before, seized the paper with joy and renewed their subscriptions.

Émile de Girardin was saved, but Balzac was humiliated, and a crowd of little men immediately attacked him, ridiculing *The Peasants* and the fifty characters already introduced. Dumas, who possessed a most generous heart, must have been greatly disturbed by all this, but he had sold the serial rights and was powerless to interfere. Balzac was no admirer of Dumas' work, and at times spoke of it contemptuously, the fact being that, in Balzac's eyes, its enormous popularity was its defect. One day, the two authors having met at an evening party given by Madame de Girardin, Balzac, when leaving, said as he passed Dumas, "When I can do nothing else, I shall write some plays." "Begin at once then," promptly said the popular dramatist, and no reply occurring to Balzac, he straightway departed. After Balzac's death Dumas never wrote of him but in the highest terms, though he rather naïvely confessed that he was unable to appreciate all the *Comédie Humaine*, as Balzac called his complete works.

Was Balzac too angry with Girardin to read *la Presse*? No; we feel that great was his curiosity to see what "the Negro," as he called Dumas, would make of the sixteenth century, of Catherine de Medicis and Charles IX., of Queen Margot and Henri of Navarre. Dumas had been happy in inventing his Count of Monte-Cristo, extraordinarily fortunate in coming across Athos, Porthos, Aramis, and D'Artagnan in a forgotten book of memoirs—such luck could not last, the tale of the Massacre of St. Bartholomew was a thrice-told one, his heroine, Margot, was the best-known of any queen, for had not stories innumerable been written of and round about her? "What would Dumas be able to do?" Balzac must have asked himself as he read the announcements.

It was soon seen that Dumas had been fortunate once again. He had found

In the Memoirs of the time two men whose tragic history, alluded to rather than related, strangely attracted him. The Wizard of the South read all that he or Maquet could find concerning these, and then, closing his books, allowed his imagination to lead him where it pleased. Presently he had ceased to live in the nineteenth century. It was August 18th, 1572, the night of the marriage of Marguerite de Valois and Henri of Navarre; the clock of Saint Germain-l'Auxerrois has struck midnight, the crowd is surging about the streets adjacent to the brilliantly-lighted Louvre, and with the crowd Dumas imagines himself moving. To Dumas the illusion is perfect, and when he takes his pen he immediately communicates it to the reader. The opening chapters are quickly written, and as quickly is the reader placed in possession of all the history he need know to enjoy the breathless story that follows.

Presently Dumas is not content to be a mere witness of what passes; he becomes one or even two of the chief characters, and henceforward it is not a story that he is telling, but his own adventures—all the characters are real men and women whom he jests with, quarrels with, loves, admires, execrates, despises, or kills. He knows them all perfectly, he has assimilated all knowledge necessary for his purpose, he rehearses every scene before he puts it on paper, but once there he changes nothing, and nothing stops him until he reaches the word "Finis."

Émile de Girardin was not only saved but enriched. *Queen Margot* was read by every one in *la Presse*, and before the concluding chapter was reached it was, by universal consent, considered one of the best of historical romances. It was seen to be better constructed than *The Three Musketeers*, and, on the whole, better written, but it was not found to possess the irresistible charm of that immortal book. Difficult as it is to lay aside *Queen Margot* on a first reading, the gentle reader, when his eye falls upon it among a number of Dumas' books on a subsequent occasion, may find his recollection of rivers of blood, torture-chambers, poisons, fierce hates and as fierce loves, too strong; he may choose one of the others. The force with which Dumas grips his reader is in fact tremendous; that he never relaxes it, is at once the cause of his success and of his comparative failure to charm. Nearly every other of our author's most popular books contains a chapter or two which, although necessary to the story, seem to have been developed beyond its actual needs. Every one remembers the visit of the Count of Monte-Cristo to the worker of the telegraph. The exigencies of the plot required the visit to be made, but much of the delicious description of the garden, the dormice, and the peaches is embroidery. One feels that Dumas allowed his imagination the refreshment of resting in that garden, and one rests there too and is thankful. But in *Queen Margot* there can be no rest for author or reader—the time was a terrible one, and terrible it must be made; as it was experienced by la Mole and Coconnas, so must it be experienced by the reader.

La Mole and Coconnas! Those were the names of the two men which Dumas found written in history, and of which he made two heroes after his own kind of heroes. Had he not discovered them, he would still have written an excellent romance, but with two such men to mould and fashion in his own image he becomes immense, titanic. It is the superhuman, elemental force that Dumas possesses, when genuinely inspired, that places him above all other romancers and makes D. G. Rossetti call him "the one great and supreme man, the sole descendant of Shakespeare." High praise this for Balzac's "Negro"!

And *The Peasants*—what of it? Alas! Balzac, though he worked further upon it at various times, never completed it. After his death his widow did her best to piece together many fragments, and *The Peasants*, as it exists to-day, is her work as well as his.

La Reine Margot was published in 1845 by Garnier frères (Paris) in six volumes. Subsequently Dumas and Maquet dramatised the romance, and the play was produced at the Théâtre Historique on February 10th, 1847. After the second part of *Queen Margot*, we shall publish *The Lady of Monsoreau*, in which many of the characters of the former story reappear.

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HENRI DE NAVARRE

BEING PART II. OF

QUEEN MARGOT

CHAPTER I

FRATERNAL AFFECTION

BY saving the life of Charles, Henri had done more than preserve an individual life; he had saved three realms from a change of sovereigns. For, had Charles been killed, the Duc d'Anjou would have become King of France, while the Duc d'Alençon would, in all probability, have been elected King of Poland. As for Navarre, inasmuch as the Duc d'Anjou was the lover of Madame de Condé, the complaisance of the wife would probably have secured that throne to her husband. Yet, from all these great changes, no advantage would have accrued to Henri, who would have had a change of masters, but nothing more; and instead of Charles IX., who tolerated him, he would have seen the throne of France occupied by the Duc d'Anjou, who, one in heart and purpose with his mother Catherine, had sworn his death, and would not fail to keep his oath.

All these thoughts had occurred to Henri at the moment when the boar had attacked Charles, and we have seen what resulted from the flashing through Henri's mind of the reflection that the safety of his own life depended on the life of Charles IX.

Charles had accordingly been saved by an act of devotion, the true motive of which he was quite unable to comprehend.

Marguerite, however, had understood the whole situation, and had admired that strange courage of her husband's, which always showed itself at critical moments, like the lightning which flashes only in the storm.

Henri, as he returned from Bondy, pondered deeply on the situation. Without waiting to remove his boots, he went, all muddy and blood-stained as he was, to the apartments of the Duc d'Alençon, whom he found pacing up and down his room in great agitation. On seeing him, the Duke could not restrain a gesture of annoyance.

"Yes, my good brother," said Henri, taking him by both hands, "you are angry with me because I was the first to

remark to the King that your bullet had struck his horse's leg instead of the boar, as you had intended. What would you have? I could not check an exclamation of surprise: besides, the King would have discovered it for himself, would he not?"

"Of course, of course," muttered d'Alençon, "I cannot, however, but attribute to an ill-natured motive this sort of denunciation of me which you made, and which, as you see, has had no less a result than that of making my brother Charles suspect my intentions, and of putting a barrier between us."

"We will come back to that presently; and as regards the good or bad motive which I entertained towards yourself, I have come for the express purpose of enabling you to decide the matter."

"Very well!" said d'Alençon, with his usual reserve. "Speak, Henri, I am listening."

"When I have spoken, François, you will see clearly what my intentions are, for I am about to take you into my confidence unreservedly and without regard for prudence; and when I have done so, it will be in your power to ruin me by a word."

"What is it, then?" said François, beginning to feel uneasy.

"And yet," continued Henri, "I have for a long time hesitated to speak to you on the matter which brings me here, particularly considering the way in which you turned a deaf ear to-day."

"Really, Henri, I don't know what you are driving at," said François, turning pale.

"My brother, your interests are too dear to me for me not to warn you that the Huguenots have made overtures to me."

"Overtures! and what overtures?" asked d'Alençon.

"One of them, M. de Mouy de Saint-Phal, the son, you know, of the gallant De Mouy who was assassinated by Maurevel . . ."

"Yes."

"Well! he came at the risk of his life to find me in order to point out to me that I was in captivity."

"Ah! really! and what did you reply?"

"My brother, you know that I have a tender affection for Charles, who saved my life, and that the Queen-Mother has replaced my own mother in my regards. I therefore refused all the offers which he came to make."

"And what were those offers?"

"The Huguenots wished to re-establish the throne of Navarre, and as this throne really belongs to me by inheritance, they offered it to me."

"Yes; and M. de Mouy, instead of the consent which he came to obtain, received your refusal?"

"A formal one . . . even a written one. But," continued Henri, "since that . . ."

"You have repented of your decision?" interrupted d'Alençon.

"No, but I thought I observed that M. de Mouy, being dissatisfied with myself, was turning his attention elsewhere."

"And where?" asked François, quickly.

"I have no idea: towards the Prince de Condé, perhaps."

"Yes, very probably," said the Duke.

"Besides," resumed Henri, "I have the means of ascertaining beyond the possibility of mistake which leader he has chosen."

François turned livid.

"But," continued Henri, "the Huguenots are divided amongst themselves, and De Mouy, brave and loyal though he is, only represents one half of the Party. Now, the other half, which is not to be despised, has not lost the hope of placing on the throne this Henri of Navarre, who, after hesitating when the proposal was first made, may have reflected since."

"You think so?"

"Oh! I receive proofs of it daily. That body of riders who joined us at the hunt, did you notice of what men it was composed?"

"Yes, of gentlemen recently converted."

"Did you recognise their leader, the man who gave a signal?"

"Yes, it was the Vicomte de Turenne."

"Did you understand what they wished me to do?"

"Yes, they were proposing that you should escape."

"Then," said Henri to the uneasy François, "it is clear that there is a second Party who have a different object from that of De Mouy."

"A second Party?"

"Yes, and a very powerful one, I tell you; so much so that, to obtain success,

it is necessary to unite both Parties—that of Turenne, and that of De Mouy. The conspiracy is in a forward state, the troops are designated; they are only waiting for the signal. Now, in this critical situation, which demands a prompt decision on my part, I have debated two courses between which I am hesitating. These two courses I have come to submit to you as a friend."

"Say rather, as a brother."

"Yes, as a brother," answered Henri.

"Go on, then, I am listening."

"In the first place, my dear François, I must explain to you the condition of my own mind. I have neither desire, ambition, nor capacity; I am an honest country gentleman, poor, pleasure-loving, and retiring; the rôle of conspirator offers me disadvantages poorly compensated for, even by the certain prospect of a crown."

"Ah! my brother," said François, "you do yourself injustice, and unhappy is the position of the prince whose fortune is curtailed by the limit of his paternal estate, or by a rival in the race for honour. I do not believe what you tell me."

"Nevertheless, so true is it," replied Henri, "that if I thought I possessed a real friend, I would resign in his favour the power which the party that favours me seeks to confer upon me; but"—he added with a sigh—"I have no such friend."

"You are mistaken, perhaps."

"Egad! no," said Henri. "With the exception of yourself, my brother, I see no one who is attached to me; so, rather than allow the frightful miscarriage of an attempt which might drag to light some man . . . quite unworthy . . . I prefer to inform my brother, the King, of what is going on. I shall mention nobody by name, I shall specify neither time nor country, but I shall prevent the catastrophe."

"Good God!" cried d'Alençon, unable to repress his alarm, "what are you saying? . . . What! . . . you; you, the sole hope of the Party now that the Admiral is dead; you, a converted Huguenot—only a half-hearted convert, as people think—you would raise your knife against your brethren in the faith! Henri, Henri, do you realise that by acting thus you will be handing over all the Calvinists in the Kingdom to a second Bartholomew? Do you know that Catherine is only waiting for such an opportunity in order to exterminate all the survivors?"

And the Duke, whose face terror had marked with patches of red and white, seized Henri's hand to intreat him to abandon this determination, the carrying out of which would be his, the Duke's destruction.

"What!" said Henri, with an expression of perfect good-nature, "you believe, François, that such terrible consequences would result? Yet the King's word, it seems to me, would insure the safety of the imprudent conspirators."

"The word of Charles IX., Henri! . . . Was it not given to the Admiral? to Têligny? to yourself? Oh! Henri, I tell you that, if you do this, you will destroy everybody; not only the conspirators, but also those who have had any relations with them, direct or indirect."

Henri appeared to reflect for a moment. "Had I been a Prince of importance at Court," said he, "I should have acted differently; were I in your place, for example, François, you, who are a son of France, a probable heir to the throne. . . ."

François shook his head ironically.

"Were you in my place," said he, "what would you do?"

"If I were in your place, brother," answered Henri, "I should put myself at the head of the movement in order to direct it. My name and my influence would satisfy my conscience as to the safety of the lives of the rebels, and I should extract advantage for myself in the first place, and perhaps for the King afterwards, from an enterprise which, otherwise, may inflict the greatest injury on France."

The Duke's face beamed with delight as he listened to these words.

"Do you believe," said he, "that this method would be practicable, and would spare us all these disasters which you anticipate?"

"I do," said Henri. "The Huguenots love you: your modest outward behaviour, your position at once elevated and interesting, the kindness which you have always evinced towards those of the Religion—all these things make them inclined to serve you."

"But," said d'Alençon, "there is a split in the Party: will those who are for you be for me?"

"I undertake to gain them over to your side by two considerations"

"What are they?"

"First, by the confidence reposed in me by the leaders; secondly, by their fear lest your Highness, on learning their names . . ."

"But who will disclose their names to me?"

"I will, of course."

"You would do that?"

"Listen, François; I have told you," continued Henri, "that I care for nobody at the Court but yourself; the reason which causes my affection for you is, doubtless, the fact that you are an object of persecution, like myself; then, too, my wife loves you with an affection . . ."

François blushed with pleasure.

"Take this matter in hand, brother," continued Henri, "reign in Navarre, and provided you will keep me a place at your table, and a nice forest where I can hunt, I shall think myself happy."

"Reign in Navarre!" said the Duke; "but if. . . ."

"If the Duc d'Anjou should be elected King of Poland? I complete your thought do I not?"

François looked at Henri with a sort of terror.

"Well, François, listen," continued Henri; "since nothing escapes your observation, it is just on that supposition that I am arguing. Should the Duc d'Anjou become King of Poland, and should our brother Charles—whom God preserve!—die; there are but two hundred leagues between Pau and Paris, while there are four hundred between Paris and Cracow; consequently you will be here to receive your inheritance just at the moment when the King of Poland learns that the throne is vacant. Then, if you are satisfied with me, François, you will bestow upon me this Principality of Navarre, which is but one among the jewels of your crown; offered in that way, I should accept it. The worst that can happen to you, is to have to remain King down there, and living on terms of intimacy with me and with my family, to beget a line of Kings; while here, what are you? a poor, persecuted prince—a mere third son, the slave of your two elder brothers, liable to be sent at the caprice of either of them to the Bastille."

"Yes, yes," said François, "I feel all that, so much so that I do not understand why you yourself have renounced this project which you are proposing to me. Does nothing beat inside there?"

And the Duc d'Alençon placed his hand upon his brother-in-law's heart.

"There are burdens," said Henri with a smile, "too heavy for some hands, and I shall not try to lift this one; the dread of worry banishes my desire for possession."

"Then you absolutely decline the offer, Henri?"

"I told De Mouy so, and I now repeat it."

"But in such circumstances, my dear brother," said d'Alençon, "one does not merely assert, one gives proofs."

Henri drew breath like a wrestler who feels his opponent's loins giving way.

"I will prove it this evening," said he; "at nine o'clock you shall have the list of the leaders and the plan of the enterprise. I have already handed to De Mouy my deed of renunciation."

François seized Henri's hand and pressed it effusively between his own.

At the same moment Catherine entered the room, and, as usual, without being announced.

"Together!" she said smiling; "two affectionate brothers, upon my word!"

"I hope so, Madame," said Henri, with the utmost composure, while the Duc d'Alençon grew pale with distress.

Henri then stepped backwards to leave Catherine free to speak to her son.

Thereupon the Queen-Mother drew from her purse a splendid jewel.

"This clasp comes from Florence," said she, "I give it you to wear in the belt of your sword."

Then she continued in a lower tone: "If you should hear a disturbance in your good brother Henri's apartments this evening, do not stir."

François pressed his mother's hand and said:

"May I show him the handsome present you have just given me?"

"You may do better, you may give it him in my name and your own, for I have ordered a similar one to give to him."

"You hear, Henri," said François, "my good mother has brought me this jewel, and doubles its value by allowing me to give it to you."

Henri went into raptures over the beauty of the clasp and thanked Catherine profusely.

When his transports had subsided:

"My son," said Catherine, "I feel somewhat indisposed, and am going

to bed; your brother Charles is much shaken by his fall and is going to do the same. We shall not sup together this evening, and everyone will be served in his own room. Ah! Henri, I forgot to compliment you on your skill and courage; you have saved your King and brother; you shall be rewarded for it."

"I am so already, Madame," replied Henri with a bow.

"By the feeling that you have done your duty, you mean," replied Catherine; "that is not sufficient, and Charles and I are thinking, I assure you, of doing something which will repay our obligation towards you."

"Anything that comes from you and my good brother will be welcome, Madame."

And bowing once more, he went out.

"Ah! brother François," thought Henri, as he went away, "I am sure now of not going away alone, and the conspiracy, which only had a body, has now found a head and a heart as well. Only we must be on our guard. Catherine gives me a present; Catherine promises me a reward. There is some devilry lurking underneath this; I will confer this evening with Marguerite."

CHAPTER II

THE KING'S GRATITUDE.

MAUREVEL had remained during a portion of the day in the King's Armoury; but, when Catherine saw the time for the return from the chase drawing near, she sent him into the Oratory together with the other bravos who had come to join him.

Charles, having been informed by his nurse upon his arrival at the Louvre that a man had spent part of the day in his closet, had at first been exceedingly angry at the idea of a stranger having been admitted to his room. But on his demanding a description of his appearance and his nurse having told him that it was the same man whom she herself had been told one evening to introduce to his presence, the King had recognised Maurevel; and recollecting the order of arrest extracted from him that morning

by his mother, he had understood the whole thing.

"Oho!" murmured Charles, "on the very day when he has saved my life; the occasion is ill-timed."

And he took two or three steps with the intention of going downstairs to his mother, but an idea checked him.

"'Od's death!" he exclaimed to himself, "if I introduce that subject, the discussion will never end; it will be better for us to act each in our own way."

"Nurse," said he, "shut all the doors carefully, and inform the Queen Elisabeth* that I shall sleep alone to-night, as I am suffering somewhat from my fall."

The nurse obeyed, and, as the hour for carrying his project into execution had not arrived, Charles began to write verses. At no occupation did the King ever find time pass so quickly as this; consequently it struck nine o'clock when Charles thought that it was yet hardly seven. He counted the strokes one after the other, and at the last stroke started from his seat.

"Sdeath!" said he, "it is just the time."

And, taking his hat and cloak, he went out by a secret door which he had had constructed in the panelling, the existence of which even Catherine was unaware of.

Charles went straight to Henri's apartments. The latter, after quitting the Duc d'Alençon, had merely returned to change his dress, and had gone out again immediately.

"He must be supping with Margot," said the King to himself, "he seemed to be on the best of terms with her to-day, so I fancied, at least." And he took the way to Marguerite's rooms.

Marguerite had invited the Duchesse de Nevers, Coconnas, and La Mole, and the four of them were seated at a repast consisting of pastry and preserves.

Charles knocked at the door of the ante-chamber, and Gillonne came to open; the sight of the King, however, so astonished her that she had hardly strength to make her curtsy, and instead of running to warn her mistress of the august visitor who had come to see her, she allowed Charles to pass in without giving any other warning than her exclamation of surprise.

* Charles IX. had married Elisabeth of Austria, daughter of Maximilian.

The King crossed the ante-chamber, and, directed by the shouts of laughter he could overhear, went towards the dining-room.

"Poor Henriot!" he thought, "he is enjoying himself without any thought of danger."

"It is I," said he, lifting the tapestry and inserting a laughing countenance.

Marguerite uttered a cry of terror: this countenance, for all its smiling looks, had produced upon her all the effects of the Medusa's head. Seated opposite the curtain, she had just recognised Charles.

The two men had their backs to the King.

"Your Majesty!" she cried in alarm, as she sprang up from her seat.

While the other three persons of the company felt their heads totter, so to speak, on their shoulders, Coconnas was the only one who preserved his presence of mind. He also rose, but so awkwardly, that in getting up he upset the table, china, glasses, candlesticks, and all.

In an instant there was utter darkness and the silence of death.

"Run away," said Coconnas to La Mole: "quick! quick!"

La Mole did not wait to be told twice; he threw himself against the wall, guiding himself with his hands and making for the bed-chamber, in order to conceal himself in the closet with which he was so familiar.

But as he stepped into the room he ran against a man who had just entered by the secret passage.

"What does all this mean?" said Charles, in the darkness, and in a voice which began to assume a formidable tone of impatience: "am I such a kill-joy that my appearance causes so much disturbance? Come, Henriot, Henriot, where are you? answer me."

"We are saved!" whispered Marguerite, grasping a hand which she took to be La Mole's: "the King believes that my husband is one of the guests."

"And I shall let him think so, Madame," said Henri, answering the Queen in the same low tone.

"Great Heavens!" cried Marguerite, quickly dropping the hand which she held, which was her husband's.

"Silence!" said Henri.

"Ten thousand devils! what are you whispering about there?" cried Charles. "Answer me, Henri, where are you?"

"Here I am, Sire," said the voice of the King of Navarre.

"The devil!" said Coconnas, who was holding the Duchesse de Nevers by the hand in a corner of the room; "things are growing complicated."

"Then we are lost twice over," said Henriette.

Coconnas, brave to the point of rashness, had reflected that it would have to end in the candles being re-lighted; and thinking that the sooner this was done the better, he dropped the Duchess's hand, picked up a candlestick from among the *débris*, held it to a brazier, blowing on the coals, which immediately ignited the wick of the candle.

In a moment the room was lighted up, and Charles threw an inquiring glance round him.

Henri was close to his wife; the Duchesse de Nevers alone in a corner; while Coconnas, standing in the middle of the room with a candlestick in his hand, threw light upon the whole situation.

"Forgive us, brother," said Marguerite, "we were not expecting you."

"And so your Majesty frightened us terribly, as you see," said Henriette.

"For my part," said Henri, who guessed everything, "my alarm was so real, that in getting up I upset the table."

Coconnas directed a glance at the King of Navarre, as much as to say:

"Splendid! here is a husband who grasps the situation in a moment."

"What a frightful disturbance!" repeated Charles, "look at your supper all upset, Henriot. Come with me, and you shall finish it elsewhere; I will treat you this evening."

"What, Sire!" said Henri, "your Majesty would do me the honour . . ."

"Yes, my Majesty does you the honour to take you outside the Louvre: lend him to me, Margot, I will bring him back to-morrow morning."

"You don't want my permission for that, my brother; you are master here," said Marguerite.

"Sire," said Henri, "I will fetch another cloak from my room and be back in an instant."

"You needn't do that, Henriot; the one you have on will do quite well."

"But, Sire . . ." remonstrated the Béarnais.

"I tell you not to go back; don't you hear what I say? There, come along."

"Yes, yes, go!" said Marguerite, suddenly, pressing her husband's arm, for a singular expression on Charles's face had shown her that something mysterious was going on.

"I am ready, Sire," said Henri.

Charles, however, had now directed his glance to Coconnas, who was continuing his office of lighter-up by re-lighting the other candles.

"Who is that gentleman?" he asked Henri, eyeing the Piedmontese; "not M. de La Mole, is it?"

"Who can have told him anything about La Mole?" thought Marguerite.

"No, sire," answered Henri; "M. de La Mole is not here, and I regret it, for I should have had the honour of presenting him to your Majesty at the same time as his friend M. de Coconnas; they are inseparables, and are both in the service of M. d'Alençon."

"Aha! our grand shot!" said Charles. "Good."

Then with a frown he added:—

"This M. de La Mole is a Huguenot, is he not?"

"A converted one, sire, and I will answer for him as I do for myself."

"After what you did to-day, Henriot, when you answer for anybody, I have no right to suspect him. But no matter, I should have liked to see this Monsieur de La Mole. I must take an opportunity of doing so later on."

Making a final investigation of the room with his large eyes, Charles now embraced Marguerite, and, putting his arm into that of the King of Navarre, led him away.

At the gate of the Louvre, Henri wanted to stop to speak to somebody.

"Come, come, Henriot, let us get out quickly," said Charles. "When I tell you that the air of the Louvre is not good for you this evening, 'sdeath! sir, can't you believe me?"

"Good Heavens!" thought Henri; "what will become of De Mouy all alone in my chamber. . . . I should think that air which is not good for me will be still worse for him!"

"Well!" said the King, when he and Henri had crossed the draw-bridge, "does it suit you, Henriot, that M. d'Alençon's people should pay court to your wife?"

"How mean you, Sire?"

"Why, that fellow Coconnas looks mighty lovingly at Margot, doesn't he?"

"Who has told you that?"

"Well, I have been told," replied the King.

"Mere jesting, Sire; M. de Coconnas does make eyes at somebody, but it is at Madame de Nevers."

"Oh! nonsense!"

"I can assure your Majesty that what I say is true."

Charles burst out laughing.

"Well!" said he, "the next time the Duc de Guise mentions the subject, I shall make him pull a long face by telling him of his sister-in-law's doings. After all," said the King, "now that I think of it, I am not sure whether it was of M. de Coconnas or of M. de La Mole that he spoke to me."

"It is not more true of the one than of the other, Sire, and I can assure you as to my wife's sentiments."

"Good, Henriot, good!" said the King. "I would rather see you in that frame of mind than otherwise; you are a good fellow, on my honour, and I shall end by not being able to get along without you."

With these words, the King began to whistle in a peculiar manner, whereupon four gentlemen, who were waiting at the end of the Rue de Beauvais, joined them, and they all plunged together into the thick of the town. At that moment ten o'clock struck.

"Well!" said Marguerite, when the King and Henri had departed. "shall we sit down again?"

"My word! no," said the Duchess, "I am too afraid. Hurrah for the little house in the Rue Cloche-Percée! Nobody can come in there without besieging us, and there our champions have the right to use their swords. But what are you looking for beneath the furniture and in the cupboards, Monsieur de Coconnas?"

"I am hunting for my friend La Mole."

"Look in the direction of my bed-chamber," said Marguerite, "there is a certain closet there . . ."

"All right," said Coconnas.

And he entered the bedchamber.

"Well!" said a voice in the darkness, "where are we now?"

"Zounds! why we have got to the lessert."

"And the King of Navarre?"

"He saw nothing; he is a perfect usband, and I should like my wife to ave one like him. I fear, however, that

she will not, unless it be at her second marriage."

"And King Charles?"

"Ah! the King; that's another matter; he has taken the husband away."

"Really and truly?"

"It is as I tell you: what is more, he did me the honour to look askance at me when he learned that I belonged to M. d'Alençon, and he looked black at me when he heard that I was your friend."

"You think someone has said something to him about me, then?"

"I am afraid, on the contrary, that they haven't told him much good about you. But that is not the question at present; I fancy these ladies have a pilgrimage to make in the direction of the Rue du Roi-de-Sicile, and that we are to escort the fair pilgrims."

"But it is impossible! . . . as you well know."

"Why impossible?"

"Because we are on duty with his Royal Highness."

"Zounds! that is true; I keep forgetting that we are descending in the social scale, and that from the gentlemen that we were, we have had the honour to become lacqueys."

And the two friends went off to represent to the Queen and to the Duchess that they were under the necessity of, at any rate, being present when the Duke retired to bed.

"Very well," said Madame de Nevers, "we shall go off, too."

"May we know where you are going?" asked Coconnas.

"Oh! you are too inquisitive," said the Duchess; "*quaereet invenies*—'seek and you shall find.'"

The two young men bowed, and mounted in hot haste to the apartments of M. d'Alençon.

The Duke was in his closet, apparently awaiting them.

"You are very late, gentlemen," said he.

"It is hardly ten, Monsieur," said Coconnas.

The Duke drew out his watch.

"True," said he; "still, everybody in the Louvre has gone to bed."

"Yes, Monseigneur, but we are here at your orders; shall we bring in the other gentlemen?"

"On the contrary, go into the small hall and dismiss everybody."

The young men obeyed the order, which surprised nobody on account of the well-known character of the Duke, and returned to him.

"Monseigneur," said Coconnas, "your Highness is doubtless either going to bed or to work?"

"No, gentlemen, you have leave of absence until to-morrow."

"Come, come," whispered Coconnas to La Mole, "the Court apparently is going to spend the evening out. 'Twill be a jovial night; let us have our share in the fun."

And the two young men mounted the stairs four at a time, took their cloaks and swords, and dashed out of the Louvre in pursuit of the two ladies, whom they overtook at the corner of the Rue du Coq-Saint-Honoré.

Meanwhile the Duc d'Alençon, shut up in his room, awaited, with open eyes and ears on the alert, the unforeseen incidents which he had been warned would take place,

CHAPTER III

GOD DISPOSES

THE most profound silence, as the Duke had remarked to the young men, prevailed throughout the Louvre. Marguerite and Madame de Nevers had gone to the Rue Tizon; Coconnas and La Mole had started in pursuit of them; the King and Henri were roaming the town. The Duc d'Alençon remained in his apartments in vague and anxious expectation of the events which the Queen-Mother had warned him would occur. Catherine had retired, and Madame de Sauve, seated at her bed side, was reading aloud some Italian stories, to the no small diversion of the good Queen.

It was long since Catherine had been in such a good temper. After doing full justice to a repast in company with her ladies, after holding a consultation with her physician, and adding up the daily accounts of her household, she had ordered prayer to be offered for the success of a certain enterprise of great importance, as she said, to the happiness

of her children; for Catherine, a true Florentine, was accustomed in certain circumstances to have prayers and masses recited for objects known only to himself and God.

After that, she had held an interview with René, and had selected several novelties from his rich assortment of perfumed scent sachets and other articles.

"Find out," said Catherine, "whether the Queen of Navarre is in her room; and if she is there, beg her to come and keep me company."

The page to whom this order was addressed went out, and returned shortly afterwards accompanied by Gillonne.

"How now!" said the Queen-Mother, "I asked for the mistress, and not for the maid."

"Madame," said Gillonne, "I thought I had better come myself to tell your Majesty that the Queen of Navarre has gone out with her friend, the Duchesse de Nevers . . ."

"At this hour!" said Catherine, frowning, "and where can she have gone?"

"To a lecture on Alchemy," answered Gillonne, "which is to be given at the Hôtel de Guise."

"And when will she be back?" asked Catherine.

"The meeting will last well on into the night," answered Gillonne, "so that Her Majesty will probably remain with her friend until to-morrow morning."

"The Queen of Navarre is fortunate," murmured Catherine, "she has friends, and she is a Queen; she wears a crown, and is called 'your Majesty,' yet she has no subjects. She is very fortunate."

After this sally, which made her hearers smile inwardly:

"However, as she has gone out," murmured Catherine, "for you said she had gone out, did you not? . . ."

"Half an hour ago, Madame."

"All is for the best; you can go."

Gillonne made a curtsey, and went out.

"Go on with your reading, Charlotte," said the Queen.

Madame de Sauve continued; but after another ten minutes Catherine interrupted the reading.

"Ah! by the bye," said she, "let them dismiss the guards from the corridor."

This was the signal for which Maurevel was waiting.

Catherine's orders were carried out,

and Madame de Sauve continued her story.

She had been reading for about a quarter of an hour without further interruption, when a prolonged and terrible cry reached the Royal chamber, causing everyone's hair to stand on end with terror. The cry was immediately followed by the report of a pistol.

"What is the matter?" said Catherine, "and why have you stopped reading, Charlotte?"

"Did you not hear, Madame?" said the young woman, turning pale.

"What?" asked Catherine.

"That cry."

"And that pistol shot?" added the Captain of the Guard.

"A cry a pistol shot!" said Catherine, "I heard nothing . . . Besides, is it anything wonderful to hear either in the Louvre? Go on reading, Carlotta."

"But listen, Madame," said the latter, while M. de Nancey stood with his hand upon his sword, not daring to go out without the Queen's permission, "listen, I hear footsteps, I hear curses."

"Shall I find out what is going on, Madame?" said De Nancey.

"Certainly not, sir; remain where you are," said Catherine, raising herself on her elbow as though to give emphasis to her command, "if you go away, who is to protect me in case of alarm? It is some drunken Swiss who are fighting."

The Queen's calmness, as compared with the terror pervading the whole company, presented such a remarkable contrast that Madame de Sauve, timid as she was, fastened on the Queen a glance of inquiry.

"But, Madame," she cried "it looks as if someone were being killed."

"And who do you think could be being killed?"

"Why, Madame, the King of Navarre; the sounds come from the direction of his apartments."

"Little fool!" murmured the Queen, whose lips, spite of her power of self-control, began to move strangely, for she was muttering a prayer; "the fool sees her King of Navarre in everything."

"My God!" said Madame de Sauve, falling back in her chair.

"It is over, it is over," said Catherine: "Captain," she continued, addressing M. de Nancey, "I hope that, if there has been any scandalous conduct in the

Palace, you will have the culprits severely punished to-morrow. Now, go on with your reading, Carlotta."

And Catherine, in her turn, fell back upon her pillow with an impassibility which much resembled exhaustion: those present remarked that great drops of perspiration were trickling down her face.

Madame de Sauve obeyed this formal order, but only her eyes and voice were in her task. Her thoughts, wandering to other subjects, pictured to her mind a terrible danger overhanging a beloved head. At last, after some minutes of this inward struggle, she found herself so constrained between her emotion and her duty that her voice ceased to be articulate, the book dropped from her hands, and she fainted away.

Suddenly, a more violent uproar than before was heard; heavy and hurried steps shook the corridor; two loud reports followed, which made the window panes vibrate. Catherine, astonished at this unexpected prolongation of the struggle, started up in bed, her face pale and her eyes dilated; and just as the Captain of the Guard was about to rush out, stopped him, saying:—

"Let everybody remain here, I will go myself to see what is happening out there."

This is what was happening, or rather, what had already happened:

De Mouy had received Henri's key that morning by the hands of Orthon: inside the piping of this key he had noticed a piece of paper rolled up; this he had extracted with a pin.

It contained the pass-word to the Louvre for that evening.

In addition to this, Orthon had repeated to De Mouy the invitation given by Henri to come and see him in the Louvre at ten o'clock.

At half-past nine, De Mouy had dressed himself in a suit of mail, the strength of which he had more than once had the opportunity of proving; he had buttoned over this a silk doublet, had fastened on his sword, placed his pistols in his belt, and covered the whole with La Mole's notorious cherry-coloured cloak.

We have seen how Henri, before returning to his rooms, had thought it opportune to pay a visit to Marguerite, and how he had arrived by way of the secret staircase just in time to dash against La Mole in Marguerite's bedroom, and present himself to the King's

notice as his substitute in the dining-room. It was precisely at this moment that, thanks to the pass-word sent by Henri, and still more to the famous red cloak, De Mouy passed through the wicket of the Louvre. In the ante-chamber he found Orthon, who was waiting for him.

"Sire de Mouy," said the young mountaineer, "the King has gone out, but he has bidden me take you into his room and ask you to wait. Should he be late, he wishes you, as you know, to lie down on his bed."

De Mouy went in without demanding further explanation, for Orthon had merely repeated what he had already told him that morning.

To employ his time, De Mouy took a pen and ink, and going up to an excellent map of France which hung on the wall, began to count and set down the various stages between Pau and Paris.

This task, however, occupied only a quarter of an hour, and when it was finished, De Mouy did not know how to occupy himself.

He took two or three turns round the room, rubbed his eyes, yawned, sat down and got up, and then sat down once more. At last, taking advantage of Henri's invitation, and excused, moreover, by the habits of familiarity subsisting between princes and their gentlemen, he laid down his pistols on the table, stretched himself on the enormous bed with dark hangings, which filled the further end of the room, placed his drawn sword beside his thigh, and, secured by the presence of a servant in the outer room against surprise, let himself sink into a heavy slumber, and his loud snoring soon awoke the vast echoes of the canopy. De Mouy snored like a true Southerner, and might have competed in this respect with the King of Navarre himself.

Then it was that seven men with swords in their hands and daggers at their girdles, glided silently through the corridor which led by a small door to the apartments of Catherine, and by a larger one to those of Henri.

One of these seven men walked in advance of the rest. Besides his drawn sword and his dagger, as strong as a hunting-knife, he carried, in addition, his trusty pistols fastened to his belt by silver clasps. It was Maurevel.

On reaching Henri's door he stopped.

"You are quite sure that the guards of the corridor have been withdrawn?" he asked of the man who appeared to be the leader of the little band.

"Not one remains at his post," replied the Lieutenant.

"Good," said Maurevel. "Now we only want to find out one thing, and that is whether the man whom we seek is at home."

"But, Captain," said the Lieutenant, laying hold of the hand with which Maurevel was about to seize the knocker of the door, "this apartment belongs to the King of Navarre."

"Who said it didn't?" answered Maurevel. The bravos looked at one another in surprise, and the Lieutenant retreated a step.

"What!" said the Lieutenant, "have we to arrest someone at this hour of night, at the Louvre, and in the apartment of the King of Navarre?"

"What should you say," said Maurevel, "if I were to tell you that the man you are to arrest is the King of Navarre himself?"

"I should answer that the matter was serious, Captain, and that, without an order signed by the hand of King Charles . . ."

"Read," said Maurevel.

And drawing from his doublet the warrant given him by Catherine, he handed it to the Lieutenant.

"It is all correct," replied the latter, after reading it, "and I have no more to say."

"And you are ready?"

"I am."

"And you?" continued Maurevel, addressing the others, who signified their assent by a respectful salute.

"Then listen to me, gentlemen," said Maurevel; "this is the plan of operations. Two of you will remain at this door, two at the door of the bedchamber, and two will go in with me."

"And then?" said the Lieutenant.

"Listen carefully to this. Our orders are to prevent the prisoner from calling out or making any resistance; any infraction of this order is to be punished with death."

"Come, he has *carte blanche*," said the Lieutenant to the man selected along with himself to follow Maurevel into the King's bedchamber.

"Absolutely so," said Maurevel.

"Sure, 'tis ordained in Heaven above," said one of the men, "that the King of Navarre, poor devil, shall not escape."

"And on earth below into the bargain," added Maurevel, replacing Catherine's order in his doublet.

Maurevel inserted in the lock the key given him by Catherine, and leaving two men at the outer door, as had been arranged, entered the ante-chamber with the other four.

"Ah!" said Maurevel, as the sounds of the sleeper's heavy breathing reached his ears, "it seems that we shall find here the man whom we seek."

Orthon, thinking that his master had returned, went at once to meet him, and found himself confronted by five armed men in possession of the outer room.

At sight of the sinister countenance of Maurevel—styled the King's Butcher—the faithful servitor drew back, and placing himself in front of the second door:

"Who are you, and what do you want?" asked Orthon.

"In the King's name," answered Maurevel, "where is your master?"

"My master?"

"Yes, the King of Navarre."

"The King of Navarre is not at home, so you cannot come in," said Orthon, guarding the door with more determination than ever.

"An excuse, a lie," said Maurevel; "come, fall back!"

The men of Béarn are obstinate. Orthon growled like one of the wolf dogs of his native mountains, and without letting himself be intimidated:

"You shall not enter," said he; "the King is absent."

And he clung to the door.

Maurevel made a sign; the four men seized the recalcitrant youth, tearing him from the door-frame to which he was clinging, and, as he was opening his mouth to shout out, Maurevel covered it with his hand.

Orthon bit it savagely, and Maurevel drew his hand back with a low growl and struck him a blow on the head with the pommel of his sword. Orthon staggered and fell to the ground, crying: "Alarm! alarm!" But his voice soon died away; he had fainted.

The assassins passed over his body; two of their number remained at this

second door; the other two, headed by Maurevel, entered the bedchamber.

By the light of the lamp burning on the table they saw the bed. The curtains were closed.

"Oho!" said the Lieutenant, "he has left off snoring, I fancy."

"Come, forward!" said Maurevel.

At the sound of that voice, a hoarse cry, resembling the roar of a lion rather than any human tones, came from behind the curtains, which were thrown open violently, and a man wearing a cuirass, his head covered with one of those steel caps which came down over the eyes, appeared seated on the bed, holding a pistol in each hand, and his sword across his knees.

Maurevel no sooner perceived this face, and recognised it as De Mouy's, than he felt his hair stand on end; he turned ghastly pale, a froth stood on his lips, and he retreated a step, as though he were confronted by a spectre.

Suddenly the armed figure arose and advanced towards Maurevel, so that it was now the threatened who seemed to pursue, and the threatener who seemed to flee.

"Ah! you scoundrel!" said De Mouy, in hoarse tones, "you come to murder me as you murdered my father!"

Two of the bravos, namely those who had entered the King's bedchamber along with Maurevel, alone heard these words; but, as they were uttered, the pistol was lowered to the level of Maurevel's face. Maurevel sank to his knees at the moment when De Mouy placed his finger on the trigger; the pistol went off, and one of the guards, exposed by Maurevel's sudden movement, fell pierced to the heart. Maurevel fired simultaneously, but the bullet flattened itself on De Mouy's cuirass.

Then, taking a spring and measuring the distance, De Mouy with a sweep of his great sword, clove the skull of the second guard and, turning towards Maurevel, crossed swords with him.

The combat was terrible, but short. At the fourth pass, Maurevel felt the cold steel in his throat; he gave a stifled groan and fell backwards, in his fall upsetting the lamp, which went out.

Instantly De Mouy, taking advantage of the darkness and displaying all the vigour and agility of a Homeric hero, lowered his head and dashed towards the

ante-chamber, knocking over one of the guards and hurling the other backwards, then passed like a flash of lightning between the bravos who were guarding the outer door, escaping two pistol-shots, the bullets from which crashed into the wall of the corridor, and was presently beyond all danger, since he still possessed a pistol ready loaded, besides his sword which dealt such terrible blows.

De Mouy hesitated for a moment undecided whether to flee to M. d'Alençon, whose door he fancied had just opened, or to endeavour to escape out of the Louvre altogether. Making up his mind to the latter course, he redoubled his pace, which he had slackened for the moment, took ten stairs at a bound, reached the wicket, shouted out the pass-word, and dashed out, crying :

"Go upstairs, they are killing in the name of the King."

And profiting by the stupefaction into which his words, coupled with the reports of the pistols, had thrown the sentries, he got away and disappeared down the Rue du Coq without having received a scratch.

It was at this moment that Catherine had stopped her captain of the guard from rushing out by saying :

"Stay here, I will go myself and see what is happening."

"But, Madame, the danger which your Majesty may run compels me to follow you."

"Stay, sir," said Catherine, in a more imperious tone than before, "stay. Sovereigns are protected by a power more potent than the sword."

The Captain remained.

Thereupon Catherine took a lamp, thrust her bare feet into her velvet slippers, went out of the room into the corridor, still full of smoke, and advanced, like some pale and impassive ghost, towards the apartment of the King of Navarre.

All had fallen silent once more.

Catherine reached the entrance-door, crossed the threshold, and saw, first of all, Orthon lying unconscious in the ante-chamber.

"Ah!" said she, "here is the man; further on we shall find the master, no doubt," and she passed through the second door.

Her foot struck against a body; she stooped down with the lamp and perceived the guard who had had his skull split open; he was stone dead.

Three steps further on was the lieutenant, who had been struck by a bullet, uttering his last groan.

In front of the bed she found a man who, pale as a corpse, the blood streaming from a double gash in his throat, his hands clenched in agony, was trying to rise.

This was Maurevel.

A shudder ran through Catherine's veins; she saw that the bed was empty, and sought in vain, among the three men lying in their own blood, for the corpse which she hoped to discover.

Maurevel recognised Catherine, his eyes dilated and he made a gesture of despair.

"Well," said she in a low tone, "where is he? What has become of him? Wretched man! have you allowed him to escape?"

Maurevel tried to speak, but only an inarticulate hissing issued from his throat, a reddish froth fringed his lips, and he shook his head as a sign of impotence and pain.

"Speak! speak! if only a word," cried Catherine.

Maurevel pointed to his wound and again gave vent to some undistinguishable sounds, and after a desperate effort, which only resulted in a hoarse gurgle, fainted away.

Catherine then looked around her; she was surrounded by dead and dying; streams of blood deluged the chamber and a death-like silence prevailed everywhere.

Once again she addressed Maurevel, but without arousing him; this time he remained not only silent, but motionless; a paper protruded from his doublet—it was the warrant of arrest signed by the King. Catherine seized it and concealed it in her breast.

At this moment she heard a slight noise on the floor behind her; she turned round and saw at the door the Duc d'Alençon, whom the noise of the scuffle had drawn from his room, spite of her prohibition, standing as though fascinated by the spectacle that met his gaze.

"You here?" she said.

"Yes, Madame. Good God, what has happened?" asked the Duke.

"Go back to your room, François, you will learn the news soon enough."

D'Alençon was not so ignorant of the event as Catherine imagined. When the first sound of steps had echoed in the corridor, he had listened. Seeing some

men enter the King of Navarre's room, he had connected the sight with what Catherine had said to him, had guessed what was about to take place, and had congratulated himself on the prospect of the destruction of so dangerous a friend by a power stronger than his own.

Presently his attention had been attracted by shots, followed by the footsteps of a man making his escape, and by the light thrown across the corridor from the open door he had seen a red cloak, with which he was too familiar not to recognise it, disappearing in the distance.

"De Mouy!" he cried; "De Mouy with my brother-in-law of Navarre! No, it is impossible! it must be M. de La Mole? . . ."

Thereupon he was seized with uneasiness. He recollected that La Mole had been recommended to him by Marguerite herself, and, wishing to ascertain if it were really he who had just rushed past, he ascended swiftly to the chamber of the two young men, only to find it empty. In a corner of the room, however, he found the famous red cloak hanging. The sight resolved his doubts; it was not La Mole then, but De Mouy.

Pale with alarm lest the Huguenot should have been discovered and have betrayed the secret of the conspiracy, he had then rushed to the wicket of the Louvre. There he had ascertained that the red cloak had escaped safe and sound, announcing as he dashed through the gate that murder was being done in the King's name.

"He is wrong," muttered d'Alençon, under his breath, "it is in the *Queen's* name."

And returning to the scene of the combat, he found Catherine prowling like a hyæna among the dead bodies.

The young Duke returned to his room, obeying his mother's command with assumed calmness of demeanour, spite of the tumultuous thoughts surging in his breast.

Catherine, overwhelmed with despair at the failure of this last attempt, summoned her captain of the guard, made him remove the bodies, gave orders that Maurevel, who was only wounded, should be carried to his home, and that the King should not be awakened.

"Oh!" she muttered, as with head sunk upon her breast, she entered her room again, "he has escaped once more;

the hand of God protects him; he will be King! he will be King!"

Then, as she opened the door, she passed her hand over her brow and forced her features into a commonplace smile.

"What was the matter, Madame?" asked the whole assembly, with the exception of Madame de Sauve, who was too much alarmed to put any question.

"Nothing," answered Catherine; "some noise, that was all."

"Oh!" cried Madame de Sauve, suddenly, as she pointed with her finger to the spot where Catherine had walked, "your Majesty says it was nothing, and yet each step you take leaves a mark of blood upon the carpet!"

CHAPTER IV

HOW THE TWO MONARCHS SPENT THE NIGHT

CHARLES IX. walked arm-in-arm with Henri, escorted by his four gentlemen and preceded by two torch bearers.

"When I step outside the Louvre," said the poor King, "I experience a pleasure similar to that which I feel on entering a beautiful forest; I breathe, I live, I am free."

Henri smiled.

"Your Majesty would enjoy the mountains of Béarn in that case," said he.

"Yes, and I understand your desire to go back there; but should you find the longing irresistible, Henriot," added Charles, with a laugh, "I should recommend you to lay your plans cautiously; for my mother, Catherine, is so fond of you that she positively cannot forego your company."

"What will your Majesty do to-night?" said Henri, by way of turning the conversation from this dangerous ground.

"I am going to introduce you to somebody, Henriot, about whom you shall give me your opinion."

"I am at your Majesty's orders."

"Right wheel! We will go by the Rue des Barres."

The two Kings, followed by the escort, had just passed the Rue de la Savonnerie when they saw, opposite the Hôtel de

Condé, two men wrapped in large cloaks emerging by a secret door, which one of the two men noiselessly closed.

"Oho! this deserves attention," said the King to Henri, who had also noticed them, but without saying anything, as was his wont.

"Why do you say that, Sire?" asked the King of Navarre.

"Oh! it doesn't affect *you*, Henriot. You are sure of your wife," added Charles, with a smile; "but your cousin of Condé is not sure of his; or, if he is, he is much deceived."

"But how do you know, Sire, that these gentlemen have been visiting Madame de Condé?"

"I have a presentiment to that effect. The motionless attitude of the two men who, directly they saw us, slunk into the doorway and haven't stirred since; then, something in the cut of the cloak of the smaller of the two . . . Egod! it would be a strange thing. . . ."

"What would?"

"Nothing; merely an idea which occurred to me, that's all: let us advance."

And he walked straight towards the two men, who, seeing that they were discovered, began to walk away.

"Ho there! you gentlemen, stop!" said the King.

"Is it to us that you are speaking?" asked a voice which made Charles and his companion start.

"Well! Henriot, do you recognise that voice *now*?" said Charles.

"Sire," said Henri, "if your brother the Duc d'Anjou were not at La Rochelle, I could have sworn that voice was his."

"Well! he is *not* at La Rochelle, that's all," said Charles.

"But who is it with him?"

"You do not recognise him?"

"No, Sire."

"And yet his is a figure *not* to be mistaken. Wait, and you shall recognise him. Ho there! I tell you," repeated the King: "'Od's my life! don't you hear me?"

"Are you the watch, that you stop us in this way?" said the taller of the two men, unwrapping his arms from the folds of his cloak."

"Assume that we are the watch, and stop when you are ordered to," said the King.

Then, whispering into Henri's ear:

"You will see flames burst from the volcano," said he.

"You are eight in number," said the taller of the men, this time disclosing not only his arm but his face, "but were you a hundred, clear out of our road, I say!"

"Ha! the Duc de Guise!" said Henri.

"Yes, our cousin of Lorraine; you know him at last; that's all right."

"The King!" exclaimed the Duke.

At these words, the second of the two men respectfully uncovered his head, and then buried himself in his cloak and remained motionless.

"Sire," said the Duc de Guise, "I have just been paying a visit to my sister-in-law. Madame de Condé."

"Yes . . . and you have brought with you one of your gentlemen; which is it?"

"Sire, you do not know him," answered the Duke.

"Then I will make his acquaintance," said the King.

And walking straight up to him, he motioned to one of the two lackeys to approach with his torch.

"Pardon me, brother!" said the Duc d'Anjou, opening his cloak and bowing with ill-disguised annoyance.

"Ah! Henri, it is you, is it? . . . But no, it is not possible, I must be mistaken. . . . My brother of Anjou would not have gone to see anyone without first paying his respects to me. He is not ignorant that for Princes of the Blood returning to Paris there is but one gate to the capital, namely, the wicket of the Louvre."

"Forgive me, sire," said the Duc d'Anjou; "I beg your Majesty to excuse my inconsistent conduct."

"Oh! certainly," answered the King, in an ironical tone; "and what were you doing, my brother, at the Hôtel de Condé?"

"Why!" said the King of Navarre, slily, "he was doing what your Majesty was saying just now."

And stooping to the King's ear, he finished his sentence with a loud burst of laughter.

"What is the matter now?" asked the Duc de Guise, haughtily; for, like all the rest of the Court, he was in the habit of treating the unfortunate King of Navarre with a good deal of rudeness. . . . "Why shouldn't I go to see my sister-in-law? The Duc d'Alençon goes to see his, doesn't he?"

Henri reddened slightly.

"What sister-in-law?" asked Charles;

"I didn't know he had any except the Queen Elisabeth."

Excuse me, sire, I should have said his sister, Madame Marguerite, whom we saw, as we were coming here half an hour ago, go by in a litter, accompanied by two popinjays who were trotting beside her, one at either door."

"Really!" said Charles . . . "What do you say to that, Henri?"

"That the Queen of Navarre is free to go where she likes; I doubt all the same whether she has left the Louvre."

"And I am sure of it," said the Duc de Guise.

"And I, too," said the Duc d'Anjou, "and, by the same token, the litter stopped in the Rue Cloche-Percée."

"In that case your sister-in-law—not this one," said Henri, pointing to the Hôtel de Condé, "but the one over yonder," and he turned his finger in the direction of the Hôtel de Guise, "must also be of the party, for we left them together, and they are inseparable, as you know."

"I don't understand your Majesty's meaning," answered the Duc de Guise.

"On the contrary," said the King, "it is perfectly clear, and that is why there was a gallant running beside each door."

"Well!" said the Duke, "if there is any scandal on the part of the Queen and on the part of my sisters-in-law, we will appeal to the King's justice to put a stop to it."

"By the Lord!" said Henri, "let us leave Mesdames de Condé and de Nevers out of the question. The King is not uneasy about his sister . . . and I have perfect confidence in my wife."

"No, no," said Charles; "I am determined to satisfy myself on the point, but let us manage our business by ourselves. The litter stopped in the Rue Cloche-Percée, you say, cousin?"

"Yes, sire."

"You would recognise the place?"

"Yes, sire."

"Well! let us go there; and if we have to burn down the house to find out who is inside, we will do so."

It was with this intention, far from reassuring as regards the peace and comfort of those concerned, that the four chief Princes of Christendom took their way down the Rue Saint-Antoine.

On reaching the Rue Cloche-Percée, Charles, who wished his family affairs to

be kept private, dismissed the gentlemen in attendance, telling them that they were free for the rest of the night, but were to be in waiting for him near the Bastille at six in the morning with two horses.

There were only three houses in the Rue Cloche-Percée, and the search was rendered easier from the fact that two of the three made no difficulty about opening their doors; these were the houses abutting, the one on the Rue Saint-Antoine, the other on the Rue Roi-de-Sicile.

With the third house it was a different matter; this was the house guarded by the German porter, and the German porter proved very unaccommodating. Paris seemed fated that night to furnish memorable examples of trusty domestics.

In vain did M. de Guise threaten in the purest Saxon, in vain did Henri d'Anjou offer a purseful of gold, in vain did Charles go the length of asserting that he was the officer of the watch; the worthy German paid no heed to either assertion, or bribe, or threats. Seeing that they persisted, in a manner which became importunate, he slipped through the iron bars the barrel of an arquebus, a demonstration which only made three of the four visitors laugh—Henri de Navarre meanwhile holding aloof, as though the affair possessed no interest for him—inasmuch as the weapon, unable, on account of the bars, to be pointed obliquely, could hardly be dangerous except to a blind man who should plant himself directly opposite to it.

The Duc de Guise, finding that he was unable either to intimidate, or corrupt, or persuade the porter, now pretended to part from his companions, but he did not retreat to any great distance. At the corner of the Rue Saint-Antoine he found what he had gone in search of, namely, one of those large stones such as the Telamonian Ajax and Diomed were wont to wield three thousand years ago. Placing it on his shoulder, he returned and motioned to his companions to follow him. Just at this moment the porter, who had seen the men whom he took for robbers disappear, was closing the door without having had time to push back the bolts. The Duc de Guise seized his opportunity, and, a veritable living catapult, hurled the stone against the door. The lock burst to pieces, carrying away the part of the wall in which it was embedded. The door flew open, upsetting the German, who fell to the ground,

giving the alarm by a terrific yell to the garrison, who, but for that warning, stood in imminent danger of being surprised.

Exactly at this moment, La Mole was engaged in translating one of the idylls of Theocritus with Marguerite, while Coconnas, pretending that he, too, was a Greek, was drinking Syracusan wine with Henriette. The classic and the bacchic conversation alike were abruptly interrupted. To extinguish the lights, throw open the windows, rush out on to the balcony, distinguish four men in the darkness, launch upon their heads all the projectiles that came to hand, to make a frightful din by striking the wall with the flat of their swords, such was the performance to which La Mole and Coconnas immediately devoted themselves. Charles, the most desperate of the assailants, received a silver ewer on the shoulder, the Duc d'Anjou a bowl containing a *compote* of oranges and lemons, and the Duc de Guise a haunch of venison.

Henri received nothing. He was putting questions in a low tone to the porter, whom M. de Guise had tied up to the door, and who replied with his everlasting: "*Ich verstehe nicht.*"

The ladies encouraged the besieged, and handed them the projectiles, which succeeded each other like hailstones.

"Sdeath!" cried Charles, as he received on his head a stool which crushed his hat down over his eyes, "they had better open quickly, or I will hang the whole lot."

"My brother!" whispered Marguerite to La Mole.

"The King," whispered the latter to Henriette.

"The King! the King!" said Henriette to Coconnas, who was dragging a chest towards the window with the view of demolishing the Duc de Guise, against whom, without knowing who his assailant was, he was more particularly engaged. "The King, I tell you!"

Coconnas let go the chest, and stared in astonishment.

"The King?" said he.

"Yes, the King."

"Then we must run for it."

"Why, yes, La Mole and Marguerite have gone already; come on."

"Which way have they gone?"

"Come on, I tell you."

And seizing him by the hand, Henriette dragged Coconnas through the

secret door into the adjoining house; and all four, after closing the door behind them, made their escape by the gate which opened on the Rue Tizon.

"Oho!" said Charles, "I fancy the garrison is surrendering."

They waited a few minutes, but no sound reached the besiegers.

"They are planning some stratagem," said the Duc de Guise.

"Or, rather, they recognised the King's voice, and have bolted," said the Duc d'Anjou.

"Still, they are bound to pass this way," said Charles.

"Yes, unless the house has two doors," observed the Duc d'Anjou.

"Take your stone again, cousin," said the King, "and burst in the other door, if there is one."

The Duke thought it unnecessary to resort to such strong measures, having remarked that the second door was less solid than the first, and he broke it in with a mere kick of the foot.

"Torches, torches!" said the King.

The torches had gone out, but the lackeys carried with them the means of lighting them again. When they were relighted, Charles took one and handed the other to the Duc d'Anjou.

The Duc de Guise led the way, sword in hand.

They mounted to the first floor.

In the dining-room they found supper served, or rather cleared away, for it was the supper that had furnished the chief part of the projectiles. The candelabra were knocked over, the furniture was all topsy-turvy, and everything except the silver smashed to atoms.

From the dining-room they passed to the *salon*, but they found nothing there any more than in the first room which might lead to the identification of the occupants. Some Greek and Latin books and some musical instruments were all that they discovered.

The bedroom was even more reticent. A night lamp was burning in an alabaster globe suspended from the ceiling; but there were no indications of anyone having so much as entered this room.

"There is a second exit," said the King.

"Most probably," said the Duc d'Anjou.

"Yes, but where is it?" asked the Duc de Guise.

They searched in every direction, but found no door.

"Where is the porter?" asked the King.
 "I have tied the fellow up to the iron grating of his door," said the Duc de Guise.
 "Question him, cousin."
 "He refuses to answer."
 "Bah! we will light a small fire round his legs, and that will make him speak," said the King with a laugh.
 Henri looked eagerly through the window.
 "He isn't there," said he.
 "Who has untied him?" asked the Duc de Guise, quickly.
 "'Sdeath!" cried the King, "we can't tell yet."
 "You see, Sire," said Henri, "there is no proof that my wife and the sister-in-law of M. de Guise have been in the house."
 "True," said Charles. "The Scriptures tell us: There are three things leave no trace behind them—the bird in the air, the fish in the sea, and the woman . . . no, I am wrong, the man with . . ."
 "And so," interrupted Henri, "the best thing we can do . . ."
 "Yes," said Charles, "is for me to look after my bruises; you, D'Anjou, to wash off your orange syrup, and you, Guise, to get rid of your boar's fat."
 And with that they left the house without troubling to shut the door behind them.
 On reaching the Rue Saint-Antoine:
 "Where are you off to, gentlemen?" said the King to Anjou and Guise.
 "Sire, my cousin of Lorraine and I are going to Nantouillet's, who is expecting us to supper; will your Majesty come with us?"
 "No, thanks; we are bound in the opposite direction. Would you like to have one of my torchbearers?"
 "No, Sire, much obliged all the same," said the Duc d'Anjou, quickly and decidedly.
 "He is afraid I should have his movements watched," whispered Charles to the King of Navarre.
 Then, taking the latter by the arm:
 "Come, Henriot," said he; "I will give you some supper to-night."
 "Are we not going back to the Louvre?" asked Henri.
 "No, I tell you, you trebly obstinate fellow; come with me, I tell you, come along."
 And he dragged Henri off down the Rue Geoffroy-Lasnier.

CHAPTER V

THE ANAGRAM

HALF way down the Rue Geoffroy-Lasnier you came to the Rue Garnier-sur-l'Eau, at the end of which the Rue des Barres extended to right and left. On going a few yards along this street towards the Rue de la Mortellerie, you saw on the right hand a small detached house, in the middle of a garden enclosed by high walls, to which a large door afforded the sole entrance.

Charles drew a key from his pocket and opened the door, which yielded at once, being secured only by the lock; then, having admitted Henri and the lackey who bore the torch, he closed the door behind him.

One small window alone was lighted up. Charles smilingly pointed it out to Henri.

"I don't understand, Sire," said the latter.

"You will understand presently, Henriot."

The King of Navarre looked at Charles in astonishment. His voice and his features assumed a softness of expression so foreign to the habitual character of his countenance that Henri hardly knew him.

"Henriot," said the King to him, "I told you that every time I come out of the Louvre, I feel as if I had escaped from hell: when I go in here, I am entering Paradise."

"Sire," said Henri, "I am glad that your Majesty has thought me worthy to make the journey to the celestial regions in your company."

"The way is narrow," said the King, as he began to climb a small staircase, "but that is in order to complete the comparison."

"And who is the angel that guards the entrance to your Eden, Sire?"

"You shall see," answered Charles.

Motioning Henri to follow him without any noise, he opened a door, then a second, and paused on the threshold.

"Look!" said he.

Henri approached and stood with his eyes fixed on one of the most charming sights he had ever seen.

A girl of about eighteen or nineteen

asleep with her head resting on the foot of a cot containing a child, also asleep, whose tiny feet she held close to her lips with both hands, while her long hair floated around her like golden billows.

The scene resembled some painting by Albano, representing the Virgin and Infant Christ.

"Oh! Sire," said the King of Navarre, "who is that charming creature?"

"The angel of my Paradise, Henriot, the only person who loves me for myself alone."

Henri smiled.

"Yes, for myself alone," said Charles, "for she loved me before she knew that I was the King."

"And now that she knows?"

"Well, now that she knows," said Charles, with a sigh that proved how heavily his blood-stained royalty sometimes weighed upon his mind, "now that she knows, she loves me still; judge for yourself."

The King approached softly, and, as lightly as the bee touches the lily, pressed a kiss on the girl's rosy cheek.

It was enough, however, to wake her.

"Charles!" she murmured, opening her eyes.

"You see," said the King, "she calls me Charles: the Queen calls me 'sire.'"

"Oh! you are not alone, my King," she exclaimed.

"No, my good Marie: I wanted to bring you another King more happy than myself, since he has no crown; less happy than myself, since there is but one Marie Touchet. God has a compensation for everyone."

"Sire, is it the King of Navarre?"

"Himself, my child: come here, Henriot."

The King of Navarre approached: Charles took his right hand.

"Look at this hand, Marie," said he; "it is the hand of a good brother and a loyal friend. But for this hand, look you..."

"Well, Sire?"

"Well! but for this hand, Marie, our child would to-day be fatherless."

Marie uttered a cry, fell upon her knees, and seizing Henri's hand, covered it with kisses.

"That is right, Marie," said Charles.

"And what have you done to thank him, Sire?"

"I have done for him what he did for me."

Henri looked at Charles in astonishment.

"You will know one day what I mean, Henriot; meanwhile, come and look."

And he stepped to the cot where the child lay sleeping.

"Ah!" said he, "were this fine little lad sleeping at the Louvre instead of in this little house in the Rue des Barres, it would make a good many changes in the present, and, perhaps, in the future also."

"Sire," said Marie, "an' it please your Majesty, I prefer that he should sleep here, he sleeps better."

"Then let us not disturb his slumbers," said the King; "it is so good to sleep when one is not troubled by dreams."

"Well! Sire," said Marie, pointing with her hand to one of the doors leading from the room.

"Yes, Marie, you are right," said Charles; "let us have supper."

"My beloved Charles," said Marie, "you will ask the King, your brother, to excuse me, will you not?"

"For what?"

"For sending away our servants. Sire," continued Marie, addressing the King of Navarre, "you must know that Charles prefers to be waited on only by myself."

"I' faith!" said Henri, "I can well believe it."

The two men passed into the dining-room, while the anxious mother carefully covered up in a warm rug the little Charles, who, thanks to that sound sleep which his father envied him, had not awakened.

Presently Marie rejoined them.

"There are only two covers laid," said the King.

"Allow me to wait upon your Majesties," said Marie.

"Come, Henriot," said Charles, "you see you are bringing me misfortune."

"How, Sire?"

"Didn't you hear what Marie said?"

"Forgive me, Charles, forgive me."

"I forgive you; but sit down there close to me, between the two of us."

"I will obey you," said Marie.

She brought a cover, seated herself

* In point of fact, this natural son, who was none other than the famous Duc d'Angoulême who died in 1650, had he been legitimate, would have prevented the succession of Henri III., Henri IV., Louis XIII., and Louis XIV. The mind reels at the thought of the alteration in the course of history which this might have produced.

between the two kings, and waited on them. "Isn't it delightful, Henriot," said Charles, "to have a place where one can venture to eat and drink without needing someone to try your wine and your meat beforehand?"

"Sire," said Henri, with a smile—for the question reminded him of his own perpetual anxiety in this respect—"believe me, nobody appreciates your good fortune better than myself."

"Well, then, Henriot, caution Marie that if we are to remain fortunate in this respect, she must take care not to become mixed up in politics; above all, she must not make the acquaintance of my mother."

"The fact is, that Queen Catherine is so passionately fond of your Majesty, that she might be jealous of your loving anybody else," replied Henri, endeavouring, by means of an evasion, to escape the King's dangerous confidences.

"Marie," said the King, "I am introducing you to one of the most clever and witty men of my acquaintance. He has taken in everybody at Court, look you, and that is saying a good deal: it is only I who have been able to penetrate the depths, I will not say of his heart, but of his mind."

"Sire," said Henri, "I am sorry that by exaggerating, as you do, the capacity of my mind, you should throw doubt on the sincerity of my heart."

"I exaggerate nothing, Henriot," said the King; "and people will know the truth about you some day."

Then, turning towards Marie:

"In particular he makes up anagrams admirably: ask him to compose an anagram out of your name, and I warrant he will do it."

"Oh! what could be found in the name of a poor girl like me? What graceful thought can be evolved from that group of letters which chance has arranged into Marie Touchet?"

"The anagram of that name is very simple, Sire," said Henri, "and I can lay claim to no great credit for discovering it."

"Ha! ha! he has done it already," said Charles: "look, Marie."

Henri drew his tablets from the pocket of his doublet, tore out a page, and below the name

Marie Touchet

wrote

Je charme tout.

Then he handed the page to the girl.

"Oh! impossible!" she exclaimed.

"What has he found?" asked Charles.

"Sire, I really dare not tell you."

"Sire," said Henri, "in the name of Marie Touchet there is, letter for letter, by the change of the I into a J, which is quite usual: *Je charme tout*."

"Positively, letter for letter," exclaimed Charles. "That must be your motto, Marie, do you hear? Never was a motto better deserved. Thanks, Henriot. Marie, I will give it you, written in diamonds."

The supper came to an end as two o'clock struck from the tower of Notre-Dame.

"Now, Marie," said Charles, "as a reward for the compliment he has paid you, you must give him an arm-chair where he can sleep until the morning; only it must be at a good distance from us, for he snores fearfully. Then if you wake before I do, Henriot, you must rouse me, for we must be at the Bastille by six. Make yourself comfortable in any way you like, but"—he added, approaching the King of Navarre, and laying his hand on his shoulder—"on your life, mind, don't go without me, not to the Louvre above all."

Henri had formed too many suspicions in regard to matters in which he was still in the dark to allow him to neglect such a warning.

Charles entered the bedroom, and Henri, hardy mountaineer as he was, made himself comfortable in a chair, where he soon justified the precaution his brother-in-law had taken of getting beyond the reach of his snoring.

At dawn he was awakened by Charles. Having slept with his clothes on, his toilet did not occupy him long. The King was happy and smiling as one never saw him at the Louvre. The hours spent in this little house in the Rue des Barres were his sunny hours.

Both passed out through the bedroom. Marie was asleep in her bed; the child in its cradle. Both of them were smiling in their sleep.

Charles gazed at them for a moment with infinite tenderness. Then turning to the King of Navarre:

"Henriot," said he, "if you should ever learn the service I have rendered you to-night, and if any misfortune should happen to me, remember this child sleeping in its cradle."

Then kissing both mother and child on the forehead, without giving Henri time to question him as to his meaning:

"*Au revoir*, my angels," said he.

And he went out.

Henri followed him in a thoughtful frame of mind.

Two horses awaited them at the Bastille. Charles motioned to Henri to mount, and getting into the saddle himself, rode out through the Jardin de l'Arbalète, and followed the outer ramparts.

"Where are we going?" asked Henri.

"We are going to see," replied Charles, "if the Duc d'Anjou has come back on account of Madame de Condé alone, and if his heart contains as much of ambition as it does of love, which I strongly suspect."

Henri did not understand the drift of this remark, and followed Charles without making any reply.

On arriving at the Marais and coming into view, under the shelter of the palings, of all the district called at that time the Faubourg Saint-Laurent, Charles pointed out to Henri, through the grey morning mist, some men wrapped in large cloaks, and with fur caps on their heads, who were advancing on horseback, followed by a heavily laden waggon. As they drew nearer their forms became more distinct, and another man, dressed in a long brown coat, and his face shaded by a French hat, could be seen riding beside these men and talking to them.

"Ah!" said Charles, with a smile, "I thought as much."

"Why, Sire, if I am not mistaken, that horseman in the brown cloak is the Duc d'Anjou."

"Himself," said Charles. "Keep back a bit, Henriot; I don't wish him to see us."

"But," asked Henri, "who are the men in the grey cloaks and fur caps, and what does that waggon contain?"

"Those men," said Charles, "are the Polish ambassadors, and that waggon contains a crown. And now," he continued, as he put his horse to the gallop and took the road to the gate of the Temple, "come, Henriot; I have seen all that I wished to see."

CHAPTER VI

RETURN TO THE LOUVRE

WHEN Catherine thought that everything had been put right in the chamber of the King of Navarre, that the bodies of the dead guards had been removed, that Maurevel had been taken to his home, and that the carpets had been washed, she dismissed her women, for it was almost midnight, and tried to sleep. But the shock had been too violent, and her disappointment too great. This detested Henri, for ever escaping the traps into which ordinary mortals would have fallen, seemed to be under the protection of an invincible power which Catherine persisted in calling chance, although a voice in the depths of her heart told her that the true name of this power was destiny. The thought that the report of this fresh attempt, spreading within and beyond the Louvre, would give Henri and the Huguenots an even greater confidence in the future, exasperated her, and, had that chance against which she strove so unsuccessfully delivered her enemy into her hands at that moment, she would assuredly, with the small Florentine dagger which hung from her girdle, have foiled that fatality of circumstances which had hitherto proved so favourable to the King of Navarre.

The hours of the night—those hours which pass so slowly to one who is waiting and awake—struck one after the other without Catherine being able to close her eyes. During their slow progress a whole host of fresh schemes unfolded themselves to her busy mind. At last, as the day dawned, she rose, dressed herself without summoning any of her attendants, and made her way to the apartments of Charles IX.

The guards, who were in the habit of seeing her visit the King at all hours of the day and night, allowed her to pass. She crossed the ante-chamber and came to the Armoury, where she found the King's nurse sitting up.

"My son?" said she.

"Madame, he has forbidden anyone entering his room before eight o'clock."

"That prohibition does not apply to me, nurse."

"It applies to everybody, Madame."

Catherine smiled.

"Yes," continued the nurse, "I am well aware that none has the right to oppose your Majesty. I entreat you, therefore, to hear a poor woman's prayer, and to go no further."

"Nurse, I must speak to my son."

"Madame, I cannot open the door unless upon a formal command from your Majesty."

"Open the door, nurse; I insist!"

At this imperative order from the voice that was more respected, and certainly more feared, than that of Charles himself, the nurse presented the key to Catherine. The Queen, however, did not need it, but drew a key from her pocket and opened the door.

The room was empty, the bed undisturbed, and Actæon, the King's pet greyhound, which was lying on a bear-skin rug beside the bed, rose and licked Catherine's hand.

"Ah!" said the Queen, with a frown, "he has gone out. I will wait."

Plunged in gloomy meditation, she went and sat by the window which overlooked the courtyard of the Louvre, and from which the principal gateway was visible.

There she remained for two hours, pale and motionless as a marble statue, till at last she saw entering the courtyard a troop of horsemen, at the head of which she recognised Charles and Henri de Navarre.

At once she understood everything. Charles, instead of arguing with her against the arrest of his brother-in-law, had carried him off, and so saved him.

"Blind fool that I have been!" she murmured; and she waited.

A moment later steps resounded in the next room, which was the Armoury.

"Sire," Henri was saying, "now that we are back again in the Louvre, tell me why you made me leave it, and what is the service you have done me?"

"No, no, Henriot," replied Charles, laughing. "Perhaps you shall know one day, but for the present it is a mystery. I may tell you, though, that, in all probability, you will be the cause of a violent quarrel between me and my mother."

As he said this, Charles raised the curtain and found himself face to face with Catherine.

Behind him, and looking over his

shoulder, appeared the pale, uneasy face of Henri.

"You here, Madame!" said Charles, with a frown.

"Yes, my son; I have something to say to you."

"To me?"

"Yes, and in private."

"Come, come," said Charles, turning to his brother-in-law, "since there is no way of getting out of it, the sooner it's over the better."

"I will leave you, Sire," said Henri.

"Yes, yes, leave us," answered Charles; "and since you are a Catholic, Henri, go and hear Mass on my behalf, while I stay here for the sermon."

Henri bowed and went out.

Charles anticipated the questions his mother was about to put.

"Egad! Madame," said he, turning to pass the matter over as a joke, "you are waiting to scold me, are you not? However, I could not allow a man who had just saved my life to be arrested and taken to the Bastille; and, on the other hand, I had no wish to quarrel with you, being a dutiful son. Besides"—he added in a lower tone—"God punishes children who quarrel with their mother; witness my brother François II. Forgive me freely, then, and confess that the jest was a good one."

"Sire," said Catherine, "your Majesty is mistaken; this is no jesting matter."

"Yes, yes, it is, and you will end by looking at it in that light."

"Sire, your error has caused the entire failure of a plan which would have led us to an important discovery."

"A plan, bah! . . . You, my mother, cannot be embarrassed by the miscarriage of a plan; you can form a score of other plans, and I promise that I will help you in carrying them out."

"Even if you did help me, it is too late now, for he is forewarned, and will be on his guard."

"Look here," said the King, "let us come to the point: what have you against Henriot?"

"This, that he is a conspirator."

"Yes, I know that is your constant accusation; but is not everybody more or less a conspirator in this delightful Royal residence we call the Louvre?"

"But he conspires more than anybody else, and he is all the more dangerous because nobody suspects him."

"A regular Lorenzino!" said Charles.

"Listen," said Catherine, her face growing gloomy at mention of that name, which recalled to her mind one of the most bloody catastrophes of Florentine history; "listen, there is a way of proving to me that I am wrong."

"What is it?"

"Ask Henri who was in his room last night."

"In his room . . . last night?"

"Yes, and if he tells you . . ."

"Well?"

"Well, in that case I am ready to own that I was mistaken."

"But supposing that it was a woman, we cannot demand . . ."

"A woman?"

"Yes."

"A woman who killed two of your guards and wounded M de Maurevel, perhaps mortally!"

"Oh!" said the King, "this grows serious; was blood shed?"

"Three men were left lying on the floor."

"And the man who dealt this destruction?"

"Has escaped unhurt."

"By Gog and Magog!" said Charles, "he must have been a courageous fellow, and you are quite right, mother mine, I should like to know who he was."

"Well, I tell you, beforehand, you will not discover it—not from Henri, at least."

"But from you, mother? This man can't have escaped thus without leaving some trace, or without someone having observed how he was dressed."

"The only thing noticed was the smart cherry-coloured cloak in which he was wrapped."

"Oh! a cherry-coloured cloak!" said Charles; "I know only one such cloak at Court sufficiently noticeable to attract attention."

"Exactly," said Catherine.

"Well?" asked Charles.

"Well, my son, wait for me in your room, and I will go and see if my orders have been carried out."

Catherine went out, and Charles, left alone, began to pace the room distractedly, whistling a hunting air, with one hand thrust into his doublet, while the other hung down loosely, and was licked by the greyhound each time the King came to a stop.

As for Henri, he had felt very uneasy

as he left his brother-in-law, and instead of going down the usual corridor, had taken the little secret staircase which has been mentioned more than once already, and which led to the second floor. But he had hardly mounted four steps when, at the first turning, he perceived a shadowy form. He stopped short, and put his hand to his dagger. The next instant, however, he recognised a woman, who grasped his hand and said, in a voice with whose charming tones he was familiar:

"God be praised, Sire, that you are safe and sound. I have been much alarmed for you, but God no doubt heard my prayers."

"Why! what has happened?" said Henri.

"You will know when you reach your room. Don't be uneasy about Orthon; he is in my care."

And Charlotte descended quickly, passing Henri as though she had met him on the staircase accidentally.

"This is odd," thought Henri. "What can have taken place, and what has happened to Orthon?"

Madame de Sauve unfortunately could not hear the question, having already disappeared out of sight.

At the top of the stairs another shadowy form suddenly appeared. This time, however, it was that of a man.

"Hush!" said this man.

"Ah, François, it is you!"

"Don't call me by my name."

"What on earth has happened?"

"Go into your room, and you will discover; then slip out into the corridor, look about carefully, to see that nobody is watching you, and come in to me; the door will be merely pushed to."

And he in his turn disappeared down the staircase, like the figures that sink through trap-doors on the stage.

"Zounds!" muttered Henri, "the plot thickens; but as everybody tells me to go to my room, I will go there, and I shall see for myself."

It was not, however, without emotion that Henri continued his way. He possessed sensitiveness, that quality especially characteristic of youth. On the surface, smooth as a mirror, of his mind everything was clearly reflected, and all that he had just heard warned him that some misfortune had occurred.

He reached the door of his apartments and listened; no sound was to be heard.

Moreover, the fact that Charlotte had told him to go in made it clear that no danger was to be feared. He threw a rapid glance round the ante-chamber, which was untenanted; but nothing gave any indication as yet of what had taken place.

"Orthon is not here, I see," said he.

He passed into the inner room. There everything lay revealed.

Notwithstanding the water that had been poured upon it, the floor was stained with great red blotches; the furniture was smashed, the hangings of the bed slashed by sword-thrusts, a Venetian mirror broken by a bullet, while the mark of a blood-stained hand upon the wall told that this chamber, now so silent, had witnessed a deadly combat.

Henri took in all these different details with horror-stricken eyes, passed his hand across his brow, moist with perspiration, and murmured:

"Ah! now I understand the service the King has rendered me; they came to murder me . . . And . . . De Mouy! what have they done with De Mouy! The scoundrels, they must have killed him!"

And Henri, as anxious for information as the Duc d'Alençon was to give it, after another horrified glance at the surroundings, rushed out of the room, reached the corridor, satisfied himself that he was unobserved, and pushing open the half-closed door, which he shut carefully behind him, hurried towards the Duc d'Alençon.

The Duke was waiting for him in his outer room. He seized Henri's hand eagerly, and placing his finger on his own lips, dragged him into a little room within a turret, which, being completely isolated, was secure from observation.

"Ah! brother," said he, "what a fearful night!"

"What has happened, then?" asked Henri.

"They wanted to arrest you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"But why?"

"I don't know. Where were you?"

"The King took me with him into the town last night."

"Then he knew all about it," said D'Alençon. "But since *you* were not in your rooms, who *was* there?"

"Was anybody there?" asked Henri, as though he had been ignorant of the fact.

"Yes, a man. When I heard the noise, I ran to bring you help; but it was too late."

"Was the man arrested?" asked Henri anxiously.

"No, he effected his escape after wounding Maurevel dangerously, and killing two of the guards."

"Bravo! De Mouy!" cried Henri.

"Then it was De Mouy?" said the Duke, quickly.

Henri saw that he had made a mistake.

"Well, I presume so at least, for I had given him an appointment to arrange with him about your flight, and to tell him that I had surrendered in your favour all my claims to the throne of Navarre."

"In that case," said D'Alençon, turning pale, "if the affair becomes known, we are lost."

"Yes, for Maurevel will give information."

"Maurevel has been wounded in the throat, and the doctor who dressed the wound told me that he would be unable to utter a word for more than a week."

"A week! that is longer than De Mouy will need for finding a place of safety."

"After all," said the Duke, "it may not have been De Mouy."

"You think that is possible?" said Henri.

"Yes, the man disappeared like lightning, and nothing was seen but his red cloak."

"A red cloak is a more likely garment for a courtier than for a soldier: they would never suspect de Mouy beneath a red cloak."

"No," said D'Alençon. "If anyone is suspected, it is more likely to be . . ."

He stopped himself.

"More likely to be M. de La Mole," said Henri.

"Certainly, since I myself, who saw this man rush past, suspected for a moment that it was he."

"You suspected it! In point of fact, it very likely was La Mole."

"Does he know anything?" asked the Duke.

"Absolutely nothing, at least nothing of any importance."

"My brother," said the Duke, "I now feel convinced that it was he."

"The devil!" said Henri; "if it was he, it will cause great annoyance to the Queen, who is interested in him."

"Interested, do you say?" asked D'Alençon, in some confusion.

"Of course. Don't you remember, François, that it was your sister who recommended him to you?"

"Yes," said the Duke, in a hollow voice, "and accordingly I wished to help him, and the proof of my desire is that, fearing lest his red cloak might get him into trouble, I went up to his room and brought the cloak back here."

"Oh!" said Henri, "that was doubly prudent; and now I would not merely wager, but I would swear that it was he."

"Even in a court of justice?" asked François.

"On my word, yes," answered Henri. "He must have come to bring me some message from Marguerite."

"If I were sure of being supported by your evidence," said D'Alençon, "I should almost go as far as to accuse him."

"If you do that," answered Henri, "you may take it that I shall not contradict you."

"But the Queen?" said D'Alençon.

"Ah! yes, the Queen."

"We must know what she would do."

"I will undertake to find out."

"A plague on't! she would be wrong to contradict us, for this young fellow will have gained a tremendous reputation, at no great cost either, for he will have bought it on credit. It is true he will be able to repay himself both interest and capital."

"Well, what would you have!" said Henri, "in this base world one gets nothing for nothing."

And smilingly waving a farewell to the Duke, he put his head out cautiously into the corridor; and satisfied that no one was listening, slipped out rapidly and disappeared down the secret staircase leading to Marguerite's apartment.

The Queen of Navarre, for her part, was hardly more easy in her mind than her husband. The attack made on the previous night against herself and the Duchesse de Nevers, by the King, the Duc d'Anjou, the Duc de Guise, and Henri, whom she had recognised, caused her great perturbation. True, there was no proof by which she could be compromised, the porter, who had been unfastened from the iron grating by La Mole and Coconnas, having declared that he had not spoken a word. But four Princes

such as these, to whom two mere gentlemen like La Mole and Coconnas had offered resistance, would not have taken the trouble to go out of their way for a mere accident, and without knowing why they did so. Marguerite had come home at day-break, after spending the rest of the night with the Duchesse de Nevers, and had gone to bed at once, but she could not sleep, and the slightest sound made her start.

As she was lying distracted by this anxiety, she heard a knock at the secret door, and after making Gillonne ascertain who her would-be visitor was, she ordered him to be admitted.

Henri stopped as he reached the door; nothing about him proclaimed the injured husband; his habitual smile hovered on his thin lips, and no muscle of his face betrayed the terrible emotion through which he had just passed.

His eyes appeared to question Marguerite to know if she would allow him to remain all alone with her. Marguerite, understanding her husband's glance, signed to Gillonne to withdraw.

"Madame," then said Henri, "I know how much you are attached to your friends, and I fear I am bringing you vexing news."

"What news, Monsieur?" asked Marguerite.

"One of our most trusty servitors is at this moment in a situation of great embarrassment."

"Which one?"

"The dear Comte de La Mole."

"The Comte de La Mole in a situation of embarrassment! and on what account?"

"On account of last night's adventure."

Marguerite, spite of her self-control, could not avoid blushing.

At last, with an effort, she asked:

"What adventure?"

"What!" said Henri, "didn't you hear the disturbance which took place at the Louvre last night?"

"No, Monsieur."

"Then I congratulate you, Madame," said Henri, with charming innocence, "for it proves that you are an excellent sleeper."

"What happened then?"

"Why, our good mother had given orders to M. de Maurevel and six of his Guards to arrest me."

"You, Monsieur!"

"Yes, me."

"For what reason?"

"Ah! who can fathom the reasons actuating a mind so profound as that of our mother? I respect them, but I don't pretend to grasp them."

"And you were not in your rooms?"

"By a mere accident I was not; I see you have guessed that, Madame. Yesterday evening the King invited me to accompany him; but if I was not there, somebody else was."

"And who was that somebody?"

"It appears it was the Comte de La Mole."

"The Comte de La Mole!" said Marguerite, in astonishment.

"Zounds! but that little Provençal is a lively blade," continued Henri; "do you know that he wounded Maurevel and killed two guards?"

"Wounded Maurevel and killed two guards . . . impossible!"

"What! do you doubt his courage, Madame?"

"No; but I say that M. de La Mole could not have been in your rooms."

"Why not?"

"Because . . . because . . . he was elsewhere," replied Marguerite confusedly.

"Ah! if he can prove an *alibi*, that's another matter; he will say where he was, and there will be an end of it."

"Say where he was?" said Marguerite quickly

"Of course . . . he will be arrested and examined before the day is over. Unfortunately, however, as there are proofs . . ."

"Proofs! . . . what proofs?"

"The man who defended himself in such desperate fashion wore a red cloak."

"But M. de La Mole is not the only man who has a red cloak. . . . I know someone else who wears one."

"No doubt, and so do I . . . but here is what will happen—if it was not M. de La Mole who was in my room, it must have been the other man with a red cloak like his. Now, you know who that other man is?"

"Great Heavens!"

"There lies the danger; you see the matter as I do, Madame, and your emotion proves that you do. Let us talk now as two persons who speak about the thing most sought after in the world . . . the throne . . . about the most precious of possessions . . . life . . . The arrest of De Mouy will be the ruin of us all."

"Yes, I see that."

"On the other hand the arrest of M. de La Mole compromises nobody; that is to say, unless you imagine him capable of trumping up some story, of saying, for instance, that he was in the company of some ladies, or something of that sort."

"Sire," said Marguerite, "if you dread anything of that kind, you may make your mind easy . . . he will say nothing."

"What!" said Henri, "he will keep silent, though his silence should cost him his life?"

"He will be silent, Monsieur."

"You are sure of it?"

"I will answer for it."

"Then all is for the best," said Henri, rising.

"You are retiring, Monsieur?" asked Marguerite, quickly.

"Yes, yes: that is all I had to say to you."

"And you are going? . . ."

"To try and extricate us from the dilemma in which that devil of a fellow, with the cherry-coloured cloak, has landed us."

"Oh! heavens! poor young man!" cried Marguerite, dolefully, and wringing her hands.

"It must really be confessed," said Henri, as he withdrew, "that the dear La Mole is an excellent good servant."

CHAPTER VII

THE QUEEN-MOTHER'S GIRDLE

CHARLES had entered his room laughing and joking, but after ten minutes' conversation with his mother you would have said that the latter had transferred her paleness and anger to her son, while she had assumed his joyous mood.

"M. de La Mole," said Charles, "M. de La Mole! . . . We must summon Henri and the Duc d'Alençon—Henri, because La Mole is a Huguenot; the Duc d'Alençon, because he is in his service."

"Summon them if you will, my son, you will get nothing out of them. Henri and François, I fear, are more in league together than appearances would lead us

to believe. To question them, is to make them suspicious; a few days' slow and sure investigation would, I think, be better. If you give the culprits breathing-time, my son, if you allow them to fancy they have escaped your vigilance, emboldened by their triumph they will give you a better opportunity of acting with severity, and then we shall know the whole."

Charles paced up and down in undecided fashion, fretting his anger as a horse that champs the bit, and restraining with the pressure of his hand the devouring suspicion of his breast.

"No, no," said he at last, "I will not wait. You do not know what it is to wait, haunted as I am by phantoms. Besides, these fops become more insolent every day: did not two young sparks even this very night dare to resist and to rebel against us? If La Mole is innocent, well and good; but I should be glad to learn where La Mole was last night while my guards were being attacked at the Louvre and I myself in the Rue Cloche-Percés. So let the Duc d'Alençon be sent for, and Henri afterwards; I wish to examine them separately. You, my mother, can remain here."

Catherine seated herself. In the case of a resolute spirit such as she possessed, every event might, under the guidance of her powerful hand, become the means of leading her to her goal, though in appearance it deviated from it. Every shock produces either a report or a spark. The report serves as a guide; the spark gives light.

The Duc d'Alençon entered: his recent conversation with Henri had prepared him for the interview; he was accordingly in a fairly calm state of mind.

His answers were perfectly to the point. Warned by his mother to remain in his apartments, he was in complete ignorance of the events of the night. As, however, his apartments opened into the same corridor as those of the King of Navarre, he had heard what he took to be the sound of a door being burst open, followed by imprecations and pistol-shots. Then only had he ventured to open his door, and had seen a man in a red cloak rush past.

Charles and his mother exchanged glances.

"In a red cloak?" said the King.

"In a red cloak," replied D'Alençon.

"And did this red cloak cause you to suspect anyone in particular?"

D'Alençon summoned up all his courage in order to utter his lie as naturally as possible.

"At first sight," said he, "I must confess to your Majesty that I thought I recognised a cloak worn by one of my gentlemen."

"What is that gentleman's name?"

"M. de La Mole."

"Why was M. de La Mole not with you as his duty required?"

"I had given him leave of absence," said the Duke.

"Very well; you may go," said Charles.

The Duc d'Alençon stepped towards the door by which he had come in.

"Not by that door," said Charles; "by this one." And he pointed to the door leading to his nurse's room.

Charles did not wish François and Henri to meet.

He did not know that they had seen each other for a moment, and that that moment had been sufficient for the brothers-in-law to come to an understanding.

After D'Alençon had withdrawn, Henri, summoned by a signal from the King, entered the room.

He did not wait for Charles to question him.

"Sire," said he, "your Majesty has done well to send for me, for I was just coming down to you to demand justice."

Charles frowned.

"Yes, justice," said Henri. "I will begin by thanking your Majesty for taking me with you last night, for I know now that, by taking me with you, your Majesty saved my life; but what had I done that an attempt should be made to murder me?"

"It was not a murder, it was an arrest," said Catherine, quickly.

"Well, be it so," said Henri. "What crime had I committed that I should be arrested? If I am guilty, I am as guilty this morning as I was last night. Tell me my crime, Sire."

Charles looked at his mother in some embarrassment as to what answer he should give.

"My son," said Catherine, "you receive suspected persons."

"Very well," said Henri, "and these suspected persons compromise me, is that so, Madame?"

"Yes, Henri."

"Name them to me! Who are they? Confront me with them!"

"It seems to me," said Charles, "that Henriot has the right to demand an explanation."

"And I do demand it!" resumed Henri, who, feeling the superiority of his position, wished to make the best of it; "I demand it from my good brother Charles, from my good mother Catherine. Since my marriage with Marguerite have I not conducted myself as a good husband?—ask Marguerite. As a good Catholic?—ask my confessor. As a good kinsman?—ask all those who were present at the chase yesterday."

"Yes, Henriot, it is true," said the King; "but what would you have? it is asserted that you are conspiring."

"Against whom?"

"Against me."

"Sire, had I been conspiring against you, I had but to let events take their course when your horse, having its leg broken, was unable to rise, and the boar made that furious charge against your Majesty."

"By the Lord! mother, do you know, he is right?"

"But to come to the point, who was it who was in your room last night?"

"Madame," said Henri, "at a time when so few dare to answer for themselves, I cannot undertake to answer for others. I left my room at seven in the evening; at ten o'clock my brother Charles took me out with him, and I remained with him all night. I could not be with his Majesty and at the same time know what was going on in my apartments."

"But," said Catherine, "it is no less true that some man belonging to you killed two of his Majesty's guards and wounded M. de Maurevel."

"A man belonging to me?" said Henri. "Who was this man, Madame? give me his name. . . ."

"Everybody accuses M. de La Mole."

"M. de La Mole does not belong to me, Madame; M. de La Mole is in the service of M. d'Alençon, to whom he was recommended by your daughter."

"But was it M. de La Mole who was in your room, Henriot?" said Charles.

"How am I to know that, Sire? I don't say yes, I don't say no. . . . M. de La Mole is a very excellent servant,

devoted to the Queen of Navarre, and he often brings me messages, both from Marguerite, to whom he is grateful for having recommended him to the Duc d'Alençon, and from the Duke himself. I cannot say that it was not M. de La Mole. . . ."

"It was he," said Catherine; "he was recognised by his red cloak."

"Has M. de La Mole a red cloak, then?"

"Yes."

"And the man who made such short work of my guards and of M. de Maurvel . . ."

"Had a red cloak?" asked Henri.

"Exactly so," said Charles.

"I have nothing to say, then," replied Henri. "Only, it seems to me that in that case, instead of sending for me, since I was not in my room, you ought to question M. de La Mole, who, you say, was there. There is one observation, however, which I ought to make to your Majesty."

"What is that?"

"Had it been I who, seeing an order of arrest signed by my King, had offered resistance instead of obeying that order, I should be guilty and deserving of every punishment that could be inflicted; but it was not I, it was some unknown person, to whom that order in no way applied. An attempt was made to arrest him unjustly, he defended himself, even too successfully, perhaps—still, he was within his rights."

"Still . . ." muttered Catherine.

"Madame," said Henri, "the order was for my arrest?"

"Yes," said Catherine, "and signed by His Majesty himself."

"But was it an order for the arrest of anyone else who might be in my place, supposing they did not find me?"

"No," said Catherine.

"Well, then," resumed Henri, "until it is proved that I am conspiring, and that the man who was in my room is conspiring with me, that man is innocent."

Then, turning to Charles, he continued:

"Sire, I make no attempt to quit the Louvre. I am even ready to repair, at a mere word from your Majesty, to any prison of State that you may be pleased to name. Meanwhile, until there is proof to the contrary, I have the right to call myself—and I will do so—your Majesty's very loyal servant, subject, and brother."

And with a dignity hitherto unobserved in him, Henri bowed to Charles and withdrew.

"Bravo, Henriot!" said Charles, when the King of Navarre had gone out.

"Bravo! because he has defeated us?" said Catherine.

"Why should I not applaud him? When we play together with the foils and he hits me, don't I also say bravo? My mother, you make a mistake in despising him as you do."

"My son," said Catherine, pressing the King's hand, "I do not despise him—I fear him."

"Well, mother, you are wrong. Henri is my friend, and, as he says, had he been conspiring against me, he had only to let the boar alone."

"Yes," said Catherine, "in order that the Duc d'Anjou, his personal enemy, should be King of France?"

"The motive that led Henriot to save my life matters little; the fact remains that he did save it, and, by God! I don't mean him to suffer for it. As for La Mole, I will come to an arrangement with my brother, D'Alençon, to whom he belongs."

This was tantamount to a dismissal of his mother. She therefore withdrew, endeavouring to imprint some fixity upon her roving suspicions. M. de La Mole, being so unimportant a personage, did not satisfy her requirements.

On entering her apartments, Catherine found Marguerite awaiting her.

"Ah, daughter, it is you," said she; "I sent to look for you yesterday evening."

"I know, Madame; but I had gone out."

"And this morning?"

"This morning, Madame, I have come to tell your Majesty that an act of great injustice is about to be committed."

"What is that?"

"You are going to have the Comte de La Mole arrested."

"You are mistaken, daughter; it is the King, and not I, who is going to have him arrested."

"Do not let us trifle with words, Madame, when the circumstances are so grave. M. de La Mole is going to be arrested, is it not so?"

"Probably."

"On the charge of having been found last night in the King of Navarre's chamber, and of having killed two guards and wounded M. de Maurevel?"

"That is the crime of which he is accused."

"He is wrongly accused, Madame; M. de La Mole is not guilty."

"M. de La Mole not guilty!" said Catherine, with a movement of delight, and guessing that Marguerite was about to throw some light on the situation.

"No," resumed Marguerite, "he is not guilty, he cannot be, for he was not with the King."

"Where was he, then?"

"With me, Madame."

"With you!"

"Yes, with me."

Catherine ought to have greeted this confession on the part of a Daughter of France with a crushing glance; but she contented herself with crossing her hands over her girdle.

"And . . ." said she, after a moment's silence, "if he is arrested and examined . . ."

"He will say where he was and with whom, my mother," answered Marguerite, although she was certain of the contrary.

"If that is so, my daughter, you are right, and M. de La Mole must not be arrested."

Marguerite shuddered; there seemed to her to be in the manner in which her mother uttered these words a mysterious and terrible meaning; but she had no answer to make, for she had succeeded in gaining what she had come to ask for.

"But in that case," said Catherine, "if it was not La Mole who was in the King's room, it was somebody else."

Marguerite was silent.

"Do you know who that other was, daughter?" said Catherine.

"No, mother," said Marguerite, in a not over-confident tone.

"Come, do not be only half-frank."

"I repeat, Madame, that I do not know," repeated Marguerite, involuntarily turning pale.

"Well, well, we shall discover it," said Catherine, with an air of indifference. "Come, daughter, calm yourself; your mother will guard your honour."

Marguerite went out.

"Ah!" murmured Catherine, "they are in league; Henri and Marguerite have come to an understanding: provided the wife be dumb, the husband will be blind. Ah! you are very clever, my children, and think yourselves very strong; but your strength lies in your union, and I will crush you one after the other. Besides, the day will come when

Maurevel will be able to speak or to write, to utter a name, or to form it in six letters, and then we shall know everything. Yes, but in the interval the culprit will reach a place of safety; the best course is to sow disunion between them immediately."

And following up this train of reasoning, Catherine continued her course towards the apartments of the King, whom she found closeted with D'Alençon.

"Ah!" said Charles, frowning, "it is you, mother!"

"Why don't you say *again*, Charles? The word was in your thoughts."

"My thoughts are my own property, Madame," said the King, in the rough tone which he sometimes assumed, even when speaking to Catherine. "What do you want with me? out with it."

"Well, my son, you were right," said Catherine to Charles; "and you, D'Alençon, were wrong."

"About what, Madame?" asked both the princes.

"It was not La Mole who was in the King of Navarre's rooms."

"Ah!" said François, turning pale.

"Then who was it?" asked Charles.

"We don't know yet, but we shall know as soon as Maurevel can speak: so let us dismiss this matter, which cannot be long in being cleared up, and let us come to La Mole."

"Well, what do you want with La Mole, mother, since he was not with the King of Navarre?"

"No," said Catherine, "he was not with the King, but he was with . . . the Queen."

"With the Queen!" said Charles, with a burst of uneasy laughter.

"With the Queen!" faltered D'Alençon, turning as pale as a corpse.

"Oh! no," said Charles: "Guise told me he had met Marguerite's litter."

"That's just it," said Catherine; "she has a house in the town."

"In the Rue Cloche-Percée!" exclaimed the King.

"Oh! this is too much!" said D'Alençon, tearing his flesh with his nails. "And to have recommended him to me!"

"Ah! now that I think of it," said the King, suddenly standing still, "then it was he who defended himself against us last night, and who threw a silver ewer at my head, the scoundrel!"

"Yes, yes, the scoundrel!" repeated François.

"You are right, my children," said Catherine, without pretending to understand to what her sons were alluding. "You are right, for a single indiscretion on this gentleman's part may cause a dreadful scandal—ruin a Daughter of France! it needs but a moment of intoxication to effect that."

"Or a moment of vanity," said François.

"True, true," said Charles; but, "nevertheless, we cannot impeach him before the judges unless Henriot consents to lodge a complaint."

"My son," said Catherine, laying her hand on the King's shoulder with a gesture well calculated to enlist his whole attention to what she was about to propose, "attend to what I say: here is a crime, and there may be a scandal. But misdemeanours of this kind against Royalty are not punished through the instrumentality of judges and executioners. If you were ordinary gentlemen, I should not have to teach you anything, for you are both brave; but you are Princes, you cannot cross swords with a country bumpkin. Bethink you to avenge yourselves as Princes should."

"By the Lord!" said Charles, "you are right, mother, and I will consider of it."

"I will help you, my brother," exclaimed François.

"And I," said Catherine, unfastening the black silk girdle which thrice encircled her waist, and the ends of which, terminated by tassels, came down to her knees, "I will withdraw, but I leave you this to represent me."

And she threw the girdle at the feet of the two Princes.

"Ah! I understand," said Charles.

"This girdle . . ." said D'Alençon, as he picked it up—

"Secures punishment and silence," said Catherine, triumphantly; "only," she added, "it would be as well as to involve Henri also in the matter," and with the words she quitted the room.

"By the Lord!" cried d'Alençon, "nothing easier, and when Henri knows that his wife is unfaithful to him . . . So," he added, turning to the King, "you have adopted our mother's opinion?"

"In every point," said Charles, not suspecting that he was plunging a thousand daggers into D'Alençon's breast.

"It will annoy Marguerite, but it will delight Henriot."

Then, summoning an officer of his guard, he ordered that Henri should be brought down; but altering his mind, he said:

"No, no, I will go myself and find him. You, D'Alençon, warn Anjou and Guise."

And leaving his apartments, he took the small winding staircase which led to the second floor, and adjoined the King of Navarre's door.

CHAPTER VIII

SCHEMES OF VENGEANCE.

HENRI had taken advantage of the temporary respite afforded him by the examination in which he had so successfully held his own, to run to the apartment of Madame de Sauve. There he had found Orthon completely recovered from his state of unconsciousness; but Orthon had been able to tell him nothing, except that some men had burst into his room, and that their leader had struck him a blow with the pommel of his sword which had stunned him. As for Orthon, nobody had troubled about him. Catherine had seen him lying unconscious, and had concluded that he was dead. Having recovered consciousness during the interval between the Queen's departure and the arrival of the captain of the guard, who had been ordered to tidy up the place, he had fled for refuge to Madame de Sauve.

Henri begged Charlotte to keep the young fellow until he should have news of De Mouy, who could not fail to write to him from his place of hiding. Then he would send Orthon with his reply, and thus, instead of one devoted follower, he would be able to count upon two.

After forming this plan, he had returned to his room, and was meditating as he paced up and down, when suddenly the door opened and the King appeared.

"Your Majesty!" exclaimed Henri, hastening to meet him.

"Myself. . . . In truth, Henriot, you are a capital fellow, and I feel that I am growing more and more fond of you."

"Sire," said Henri, "your Majesty overwhelms me."

"You have but one fault, Henriot?"

"Is it the fault with which your Majesty has already reproached me several times, that of preferring hunting to hawking?"

"No, no, I am not alluding to that, Henriot, I am speaking of something else."

"Will your Majesty explain," said Henri, who saw by the King's smile that he was in a good humour, "and I will try to cure myself of it."

"It is this, that having such good eyes as you possess you do not see more clearly with them."

"Bah!" said Henri; "do you mean, Sire, that I am short-sighted without being aware of it?"

"Worse than that, Henriot, you are blind."

"Ah! really," said Henri, "but may it not be that this misfortune happens to me because I keep my eyes shut?"

"Yes, indeed, you are quite capable of it," said Charles. "But, anyhow, I am going to open them for you."

"God said: 'Let there be Light, and there was Light.' Your Majesty is the representative of God on earth; you can therefore do on earth what God does in heaven. I am listening."

"When Guise told you yesterday evening that your wife had just passed, escorted by a gallant, you would not believe it."

"Sire," said Henri, "how should I suppose that your Majesty's sister could be guilty of such imprudence?"

"When he told you that your wife had gone to the Rue Cloche-Percée, you wouldn't believe it either."

"How could I suppose, Sire, that a Daughter of France could thus publicly risk her reputation?"

"When we attacked the house in the Rue Cloche-Percée and I received a silver ewer on my shoulder, D'Anjou a *compôte* of oranges on his head, and De Guise had a ham thrown in his face, you saw two men and two women?"

"I saw nothing, Sire; your Majesty should remember that I was questioning the porter."

"Yes; 'Od's body! but I saw them."

"Ah! if your Majesty saw them, that's another matter."

"I saw two men and two women, I tell you. Well, I know now, beyond possibility of doubt, that one of the two

women was Margot, and that one of the men was La Mole."

"Why! but if La Mole was in the Rue Cloche-Percée, he could not have been here."

"No," said Charles, "no, he was not here. But we are not discussing now who was here; that question will be settled when that fool De Maurevel can speak or write. The point is that Marguerite is deceiving you."

"Bah!" said Henri, "don't believe a piece of slanderous gossip."

"Well, I tell you that you are more than short-sighted, that you are blind. Zounds! will you not believe me, you obstinate mule! I tell you that Margot is deceiving you, and that we are going this evening to strangle the man who is the object of her affections."

Henri gave a start of surprise, and looked at his brother-in-law with an air of stupefaction.

"You are not angry about it, at bottom, Henri, admit that. Margot will shriek like ten thousand crows; but, on my word, what care I? I don't want to see her making you unhappy. Let Condé be deceived by the Duc d'Anjou; I wink at it, Condé is my enemy; but you are my brother, nay, more than my brother, my friend."

"But, Sire . . ."

"And I don't want you to be badgered and made a fool of; you have served long enough as a quintain for all the coxcombs who come from the provinces to pick up our crumbs and make love to our wives; let them come, or rather, let them go back where they come from, by God! You have been deceived, Henriot; that may happen to anybody, but I swear that you shall have signal satisfaction, and to-morrow they will say: evidently King Charles loves his brother Henriot; why! he made La Mole put out his tongue in a mighty funny way last night."

"Come, Sire," said Henri, "is this affair really and truly arranged?"

"Arranged, resolved, determined; the popinjay will have no right to complain. I, D'Anjou, D'Alençon, and De Guise will manage the business: a King, two Sons of France, and a Prince of the Blood Royal—to say nothing of yourself."

"How do you mean—to saying nothing of me?"

"Well, yes, you shall take part too."

"I!"

"Yes, you; stab me this rogue as a King should, and we'll strangle him afterwards."

"Sire," said Henri, "your kindness overwhelms me; but how do you know this is true?"

"Why, zounds! it seems the rascal has boasted about it. He visits her sometimes at the Louvre, sometimes in the Rue Cloche-Percée. They compose verses together—I should like very much to see that popinjay's verses—they write pastorals; they converse of Bion and Moschus, alternately with enacting Daphnis and Corydon. Well! he needn't expect much mercy from me, anyway!"

"Sire," said Henri, "on thinking this matter over . . ."

"What?"

"Your Majesty will see that I cannot associate myself with this deed: it appears to me indecorous that I should be there in person. I am too deeply interested in the matter for my participation in it not to partake of mere ferocity. Your Majesty avenges his sister's honour upon a coxcomb who, by his boasts, has slandered my wife. Nothing is more natural; and Marguerite—whom I maintain, Sire, to be innocent—will not be dishonoured by your action. But if I take part in it, that is another matter; my co-operation converts an act of justice into an act of vengeance; it is no longer an execution, but an assassination; my wife is no longer slandered, she is guilty."

"By'r Lady! Henri, your words are golden, and as I was telling my mother just now, you are an infernally clever fellow."

And Charles looked complacently at his brother-in-law, who bowed in response to the compliment.

"All the same," added Charles, "you will be glad if we rid you of this coxcomb?"

"All that your Majesty does is well done," answered the King of Navarre.

"Good; then leave me to do your work; make your mind easy, it will not be done badly."

"I trust to you, Sire," said Henri.

"Only, tell me at what hour he usually visits your wife."

"At about nine in the evening."

"And leaves her?"

"Before I go to her, for I never find him there."

"Towards . . ."

"Towards eleven."

"Good; come down this evening at midnight; the affair will be over."

And Charles, after cordially pressing Henri's hand, and renewing his assurances of friendship, went away whistling his favourite hunting song.

"Sdeath!" said Henri, as his eyes followed Charles, "I am much mistaken if all this devilry doesn't proceed from the Queen-Mother. Upon my word, she hardly knows what to devise in order to embroil my wife and me; what a happy household!"

And Henri began to laugh as he laughed when nobody could see him or hear him.

Towards seven o'clock in the evening of the same day on which all these incidents had taken place, a handsome young gallant, who had just taken his bath, was arranging his hair before a looking-glass in a chamber at the Louvre, and walking about complacently as he hummed over a little ballad.

Beside him another young man was sleeping, or rather, lay stretching himself on a bed.

One was our friend La Mole, about whom certain persons had been so much taken up during the day, and about whom they were still taken up even more—though he did not suspect it, and the other was his comrade Coconnas.

In point of fact, all this great storm had passed around him without his having heard the roar of the thunder, or seen the flash of the lightning. Having come home at three in the morning, he had lain in bed until three in the afternoon, half asleep, half dreaming, building castles on that shifting sand called the future; then he had got up, had spent an hour at some fashionable baths, had dined at the inn of Master La Hurière, and on returning to the Louvre had completed his toilet before going to pay his accustomed visit to the Queen.

"You have dined, then, you say?" asked Coconnas, with a yawn.

"My word, yes, and with a good appetite, too."

"Why didn't you take me with you, selfish wretch?"

"Upon my soul, you were sleeping so soundly that I didn't like to wake you. But you can have supper, you know, instead of dinner; and mind you don't forget to ask La Hurière for some of that Anjou wine he has just got in."

"Is it good?"

"Ask for it, that's all I say."

"And you; where are you going?"

"I?" said La Mole, surprised that his friend should even ask the question, "why, to pay my court to the Queen."

"Look here," said Coconnas, "if I were to go and dine at our little house in the Rue Cloche-Percée, I should feast on yesterday's remains, and there is a certain Alicante wine there which is mighty refreshing."

"It would be rather imprudent to do that, my friend Hannibal, after what happened last night. Besides, didn't they make us give our promise not to go back there by ourselves? so pass me my cloak."

"True," said Coconnas, "I had quite forgotten. But where the devil is your cloak? . . . Ah! here it is."

"No, you are giving me the black one, and it is the red I want. The Queen likes me best in it."

"You must look for it yourself," said Coconnas, after hunting in every direction, "I can't find it."

"You can't find it!" said La Mole. "Where on earth can it be?"

"You must have sold it . . ."

"What for? I have got six crowns still left."

"Then wear mine."

"Oh! I daresay! . . . a yellow cloak on a green doublet. I should look like a popinjay."

"Upon my word, you are hard to please; then settle it your own way."

Just at this moment, and as La Mole, after turning everything topsy-turvy, was beginning to launch out into abuse of the thieves who sneaked even into the Louvre, a page from the Duc d'Alençon appeared with the precious cloak so much in request.

"Ah!" cried La Mole, "here it is at last."

"Your cloak, sir?" said the page. . .

"Yes, his Highness borrowed it for a short time in order to settle a wager that he had made as to its exact shade."

"Oh!" said La Mole, "I was only asking for it because I wanted to go out, but if his Highness wishes to keep it any longer. . ."

"No, Monsieur le Comte, he has finished with it."

The page retired; La Mole fastened on his cloak.

"Well!" continued La Mole, "whbb have you decided?"

"Nothing as yet."
 "Shall I find you here this evening?"
 "How can I tell you that?"
 "You don't know what you will be doing in two hours' time?"
 "I know what *I* shall be doing, but I don't know what *others* will make me do."
 "The Duchesse de Nevers?"
 "No, the Duc d'Alençon."
 "In point of fact," said La Mole, "I have noticed for some time that he is very friendly towards you."
 "Why, yes," said Coconnas.
 "Then your fortune is made," said La Mole, laughing.
 "Pshaw! only a younger son!" said Coconnas.
 "Oh!" said La Mole, "he has such a longing to become the eldest, that perhaps heaven will work a miracle in his favour. So you don't know where you will be this evening?"
 "No."
 "Go to the devil, then . . . or rather, dieu!"
 "That La Mole is a terrible fellow for always wanting you to tell him where you will be! how can one possibly tell? Besides, I think I want to go to sleep."
 And he threw himself upon the bed.
 As for La Mole, he flew off towards the Queen's apartments. Having reached the staircase with which we are acquainted, he encountered the Duc d'Alençon.
 "Ah! Monsieur de La Mole, is it you?" said the Prince.
 "Yes, Monseigneur," replied La Mole, with a respectful bow.
 "Are you going out of the Louvre, then?"
 "No, your highness; I am going to pay my homage to her Majesty the Queen of Navarre."
 "About what time shall you be leaving her, Monsieur de La Mole?"
 "Has your Highness any orders to give me?"
 "Not just at present, but I shall want to speak to you this evening."
 "At what hour?"
 "Between nine and ten."
 "I shall have the honour to present myself to your Highness at that time."
 "Very well, I shall rely on you."
 La Mole bowed and went on his way.
 "This Duke," said he, "has moments when he is as white as a sheet; it is very
 . . .
 And he knocked at the Queen's door.

Gillonne, who seemed to be watching for his arrival, conducted him to Marguerite.
 The latter was busy with some work which appeared to tire her considerably; a piece of paper covered with erasures and a volume of Isocrates were lying before her. She signed to La Mole to let her finish a paragraph; when she had come to the end of it, which did not take long, she threw down her pen and invited La Mole to sit beside her.
 La Mole beamed with delight. Never had he looked so handsome, never been so gay.
 "Greek!" he exclaimed, glancing at the book: "a speech of Isocrates! What do you want with that? Oh! and some Latin on this piece of paper: *Ad Sarmatiæ legatos reginæ Margaritæ concio!* — 'Speech of Queen Marguerite to the Polish Envoys.' You are going to address these barbarians in Latin?"
 "I am obliged to," said Marguerite, "since they don't speak French."
 "But how can you write the answer before hearing their address?"
 "A more conceited person than myself would make you believe it was improvised; but with you, my Hyacinthus, I don't employ such trickeries; their speech has been communicated to me beforehand, and I am replying to it."
 "Are the ambassadors on the point of arriving, then?"
 "Better than that, they arrived this morning."
 "But nobody knows the fact?"
 "They have arrived *incognito*. Their solemn entry is postponed till the day after to-morrow, I believe. For the rest, you will see," said Marguerite, with a self-satisfied air, not devoid of pedantry, "that what I have composed this evening is fairly Ciceronian. But let us drop this trifling, and talk about what has happened to yourself."
 "To me?"
 "Yes."
 "What has happened to me, then?"
 "Ah! it is all very well to play the brave hero; you seem to me a trifle pale."
 "It is from sleeping over long, then; I apologise for it humbly."
 "Come, come, don't play the braggart. I know all."
 "Be kind enough, then, to inform me, my pearl, for I know nothing."
 "Come, answer me frankly. What did the Queen-Mother ask you?"

"The Queen-Mother! . . . me! Why, had she anything to say to me?"

"What! you haven't seen her?"

"No."

"Or King Charles?"

"No."

"Or the King of Navarre?"

"No."

"But the Duc d'Alençon, you have seen him?"

"Yes, just now, I met him in the corridor."

"What did he say to you?"

"That he had some orders to give me between nine and ten this evening."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing."

"It is very strange."

"What do you think strange, tell me?"

"That you should have heard nothing spoken of."

"What has happened, then?"

"Why, that for this whole day, unhappy man, you have been suspended over an abyss."

"I?"

"Yes, you."

"In regard to what?"

"Listen. De Mouy, being surprised last night in the chamber of the King of Navarre, whom they wanted to arrest, killed three men and made his escape, his identity being unrecognised except for the famous red cloak."

"Well?"

"Well, this cherry-coloured cloak, which had deceived me on one occasion, has deceived others likewise; you have been suspected, accused even, of this triple murder. This morning they wanted to arrest you, judge you, who knows? sentence you, perhaps; for you would not have been willing to get yourself off by saying where you really were, would you?"

"Say where I was!" cried La Mole, "compromise you! you, my sweet Majesty! Oh! you are quite right; I would die with a song upon my lips to spare your lovely eyes a tear."

"Alas! my poor fellow!" said Marguerite, "my lovely eyes would be red with weeping if you did."

"But how was this great storm calmed?"

"Guess."

"How can I tell?"

"There was one way of proving that you were not in the King of Navarre's apartments."

"What was that?"

"By saying where you actually were."

"Well?"

"Well, I said it."

"To whom?"

"To my mother."

"And the Queen Catherine . . ."

"The Queen Catherine knows that you are my lover."

"Oh! Madame, after doing so much for me, you can exact any sacrifice from your servant. What you have done is truly great and noble, Marguerite, and my life is yours."

"I hope so, for I have rescued it from those who would have torn it from me; but for the present you are saved."

"And by you! by my adored Queen!" he cried.

At the same moment a loud noise made them both start. La Mole, filled with a vague dread, retreated backwards; Marguerite uttered a cry, and remained with her eyes fixed on a broken pane in one of the windows.

Through this pane a stone as large as an egg had just entered, and was rolling across the floor.

La Mole in his turn saw the broken square of glass, and perceived the cause of the noise.

"Who is the insolent scoundrel?" he cried, rushing to the window.

"Wait a moment," said Marguerite; "there seems to be something fastened to the stone."

"It looks like a piece of paper," said La Mole.

Marguerite threw herself upon the strange projectile, and tore away the thin leaf which, folded like a narrow riband, was wrapped round the middle of the stone.

The paper was held in position by a string, the end of which disappeared through the broken pane.

Marguerite unfolded the letter and read it.

"Unhappy man!" she exclaimed.

She handed the paper to La Mole, from where she stood pale and motionless as a statue of 'Terror.'

La Mole, his heart wrung by a presentiment of woe, read as follows:—

"They are waiting for M. de La Mole with long swords in the corridor leading to the apartments of M. d'Alençon. Perhaps he would prefer to escape by this window and go and join M. de Mouy at Mantes . . ."

"Well!" asked La Mole, after reading the missive, "are their swords longer than mine, then?"

"No, but perhaps there are ten of them to one."

"And who is the friend who sends us this note?" asked La Mole.

Marguerite grasped his hands and fastened on him an eager glance.

"The King of Navarre's handwriting!" she exclaimed. "If he warns us, it means that the danger is real. Fly, La Mole, fly, I entreat you."

"But how am I to fly?" said La Mole.

"By this window; doesn't he say so?"

"Bid me do so, my Queen, and I will jump from this window in obedience to your word, were I to be dashed to pieces twenty times in my fall."

"Wait, wait," said Marguerite; "I fancy this string supports a weight."

"Let us see," said La Mole.

And both of them, drawing up the object attached to the string, saw with unspeakable delight the end of a ladder plaited of horse-hair and silk appearing.

"Ah! you are saved," cried Marguerite.

"It is a miracle from heaven!"

"No, a kindness on the part of the King of Navarre."

"What if it were a trap, on the other hand?" said La Mole. "Supposing this ladder were to break beneath my feet! Madame, have you not this very day confessed your affection for me?"

Marguerite, in whom joy had revived her anxiety, turned deadly pale.

"You are right," she said, "it is possible."

And she rushed towards the door.

"What are you going to do?" cried La Mole.

"Find out for myself if it be true that they are waiting for you in the corridor."

"Never! never! their anger might descend on you!"

"Think you they would harm a Daughter of France? A woman and a Princess of the Blood, I am doubly inviolable."

The Queen uttered these words with such dignity that La Mole felt that in reality she ran no risk, and that he must let her act as she proposed.

Marguerite placed La Mole in the charge of Gillonne, leaving it to his sagacity to fly or to wait her return, according to the course of events, and stepped into the corridor, which, branching off to the library and several reception

rooms, at its further end adjoined the apartments of the King and the Queen-Mother, and the little secret staircase by which you ascended to the rooms of the Duc d'Alençon and Henri. Although it was hardly nine o'clock, all the lights were extinguished, and the corridor, except for a slight glimmer proceeding from where it branched off, was in total darkness. The Queen of Navarre advanced with firm step; but when she had traversed a third of the length of the corridor she heard a low whisper of voices, which was rendered mysterious and alarming by the caution taken to subdue them. But almost immediately the sound ceased as though hushed by the order of a superior, and everything faded into darkness; for this glimmer, feeble as it was, seemed to grow even fainter.

Marguerite continued her way, walking straight towards the danger which, if it existed, awaited her there. She was calm to all appearance, though her clenched hands denoted a violent tension of the nerves. In proportion as she approached, the sinister silence deepened, and a shadowy form that looked like a hand obscured the flickering and uncertain light.

Suddenly, as she reached the point where the corridor branched off, a man advanced two paces, disclosing his presence by uncovering a candle in a silver-gilt candlestick, and cried:—

"Here he is!"

Marguerite found herself face to face with her brother Charles; behind him stood the Duc d'Alençon with a silken cord in his hand. In the darkness at the end of the corridor loomed two shadowy forms side by side, visible only by the reflection cast by the drawn sword which each was holding.

Marguerite took in the whole scene at a glance. She made a supreme effort over herself, and answered Charles laughingly:—

"You mean: Here *she* is, Sire!"

Charles retreated a step; all the others remained motionless.

"You, Margot!" said he; "where are you going to at this hour?"

"At this hour!" said Marguerite; "is it so late, then?"

"I asked you where you were going."

"To look for a volume of Cicero's speeches which I think I left with our mother."

"Without any light?"

"I thought the corridor was still lighted."

"Have you come from your room?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing this evening?"

"Preparing my speech for the Polish envoys. Is there not a council to-morrow, and was it not arranged that we should each of us submit our speeches to your Majesty?"

"And have you nobody to help you in this task?"

Marguerite summoned up all her courage.

"Yes, my brother," she said, "M. de La Mole; he is an excellent scholar."

"So excellent," said the Duc d'Alençon, "that I begged him, after he had finished with you, my sister, to come and give some advice to me, whose classical knowledge is not equal to your own."

"And were you waiting for him?" said Marguerite, in a perfectly natural tone.

"Yes," said D'Alençon, impatiently.

"In that case," said Marguerite, "I will send him to you, for we have finished."

"And your book?" said Charles.

"I will get Gillonne to fetch it."

The two brothers exchanged a sign.

"Very well," said Charles, "and we will continue our patrol."

"Your patrol!" said Marguerite; "then for whom are you looking?"

"The little man in red," said Charles. "Don't you know that there is a little man in red who haunts the old Louvre? My brother, D'Alençon, declares he has seen him, and we are hunting him down."

"Good luck, then," said Marguerite.

And she walked away, throwing a glance behind her as she went, and saw reflected on the wall the shadows of the four men now gathered close together, and apparently deliberating.

She was at the door of her room in an instant.

"Open, Gillonne, open," she said.

Gillonne obeyed.

Marguerite rushed into the room, and found La Mole waiting, calm and determined, but with his hand upon his sword.

"Fly," said she, "fly without losing a moment; they are waiting in the corridor to murder you."

"You order me to fly?" said La Mole.

"I bid you do so. We must part in order to meet again."

During Marguerite's absence La Mole

had fastened the ladder to the bar of the window; he now placed his leg over the sill, but before setting foot on the first step, he kissed the Queen's hand tenderly.

"If this ladder proves a trap and I die for you, Marguerite, remember your promise."

"It is not a promise, La Mole, it is an oath. Fear nothing, and farewell,"—and La Mole, emboldened by these reassuring words, slid rather than climbed down the ladder.

At the same moment there was a knock at the door.

Marguerite followed La Mole with her eyes during his perilous descent, and did not turn round until she was assured that his feet had touched the ground.

"Madame," Gillonne was saying, "Madame!"

"Well?" asked Marguerite.

"The King is knocking."

"Open the door."

Gillonne obeyed.

The four Princes, impatient, doubtless, at being kept waiting, were standing on the threshold. Charles entered at once.

Marguerite advanced to meet her brother with a smile upon her lips. The King threw a rapid glance around him.

"What are you looking for, brother?" asked Marguerite.

"Why," said Charles, "I am looking . . . I am looking . . . 'od's my life. I am looking for M. de La Mole."

"M. de La Mole!"

"Yes, where is he?"

Marguerite took her brother by the hand and led him to the window.

At this very moment two men were galloping rapidly away past the furthestmost tower of the Palace outwork, known as the Wooden Tower; one of them untied his scarf and waved the white silk in token of farewell. The two men were La Mole and Orthon.

Marguerite pointed them out to Charles.

"Well!" asked the King, "what does that mean?"

"It means," answered Marguerite, "that the Duc d'Alençon can put his cord back into his pocket, and that the Duc d'Anjou and the Duc de Guise can sheathe their swords, for M. de La Mole will not pass through the corridor to-night."

CHAPTER IX

THE ATRIDÆ

SINCE his return to Paris, the Duc d'Anjou had held no private conversation with his mother, Catherine, of whom he was, as everyone knows, the favourite son.

An interview with her was not merely the empty carrying out of what etiquette required, nor a ceremonial irk to undergo, but the fulfilment of a task very pleasant to this son, who, if he did not love his mother, was certain at least that he was tenderly beloved by her. In point of fact, Catherine had a genuine preference for this son, either on account of his bravery, or perhaps rather on account of his beauty—for Catherine was a woman as well as mother—or lastly, for this cause, according to certain scandalous stories, Henri d'Anjou revived in the memory of the Florentine the happy period of some mysterious intrigue.

Catherine alone knew of the return of the Duc d'Anjou to Paris, an event of which Charles himself would have been ignorant, had not chance brought him opposite the Hôtel de Condé just as his mother was coming out from it. Charles was not expecting him until the day following, and Henri d'Anjou hoped to conceal from him the fact that he had arrived a day earlier with two objects in view, namely, that of visiting the fair Marie de Clèves, Princesse de Condé, and of holding a conference with the English envoys.

It was this last object, of the purpose of which Charles was uncertain, which the Duc d'Anjou had to explain to his mother; and the reader, who may possibly be interested with regard to it, as Henri of Navarre certainly was, will profit by the explanation.

Accordingly, when the Duc d'Anjou, long expected, entered his mother's presence, Catherine, who was usually so kind and stiff in manner—Catherine, who, since the departure of her favourite son, had bestowed no warm embrace upon anyone except Coligny, who was to be ordered the next day—opened her arms to the child of her love, and clasped him to her breast with an outburst of maternal affection, of which her withered heart might have been thought incapable.

Then she held him at arm's length, gazed at him, and drew him to her breast once more.

"Ah! Madame," said he, "since heaven grants me the happiness of embracing my mother unobserved by witnesses, comfort the most unfortunate man on earth."

"Why, good heavens, my dear child," exclaimed Catherine, "what, then, has happened to you?"

"Nothing but what you knew before. I am in love; I am loved in return; but it is this very love which causes my unhappiness."

"Explain, my son," said Catherine.

"Why, mother . . . these ambassadors, this departure . . ."

"Yes," said Catherine, "the ambassadors are arrived, your departure is urgent."

"It is not urgent, mother, but my brother will make it so. He hates me; I give him umbrage; he wants to get rid of me."

Catherine smiled.

"By giving you a throne, poor unhappy king!"

"Never mind that, mother," replied Henri, bitterly, "I do not want to go. I, a Son of France, reared in the refinement of polite manners by the best of mothers, beloved by one of the most charming women in the world, to have to be exiled to those snow-bound regions at the ends of the earth, to die by inches among those boorish clods, who get drunk from morning till night, and estimate the capacity of their King as they would that of a barrel, by the amount which it contains. No, my mother, I do not want to go; it would be the death of me!"

"Come, Henri," said Catherine, pressing her son's hands, "come, is that your real reason?"

Henri lowered his eyes as though he dared not confess, even to his mother, the thoughts that were passing through his mind.

"Is there not another reason?" asked Catherine, "a less fanciful one, but more reasonable, more of a political nature?"

"Mother, it is not my fault if my mind has dwelt on the matter to a greater extent, perhaps, than it ought to have done; but didn't you tell me yourself that the horoscope cast at the birth of my brother Charles foreshadowed his early death?"

"Yes," said Catherine, "but a horoscope may lie, my son. I myself at this moment have good reason for hoping that all these horoscopes may not prove true."

"But did not his horoscope say so?"

"His horoscope mentioned a quarter of a century, but whether for his life or for his reign it did not specify."

"Well, my mother, contrive that I may remain here. My brother is nearly twenty-four; in a year from now the matter will be settled."

Catherine reflected deeply.

"Yes, certainly," she said, "that would be the better course, if it were possible to carry it out."

"Just think, mother," exclaimed Henri, "how annoyed I should be if it turned out that I had bartered the throne of France for that of Poland! If I were to be constantly tortured by the thought that I might be reigning at the Louvre, surrounded by this elegant and literary Court, with the assistance of the best of mothers, whose sage advice would have relieved me of half my toils and worries, and who, accustomed to share with my father a portion of the burdens of the State, would have been willing to continue to share it with myself. Ah! mother, I should have been a great king!"

"There, there, dear child," said Catherine, who also had cherished among her sweetest hopes the dream of such a future, "there, do not grieve. Have you not thought, for your part, of some way of arranging the matter?"

"Yes, certainly I have, and it is with that object especially that I returned two or three days before I was expected, while allowing my brother Charles to think that it was for the purpose of seeing Madame de Condé; then I went to meet De Lasco, the most important of the envoys, and made myself known to him, doing in that first interview all that was possible to make myself odious to him, and I hope that I succeeded in doing so."

"Ah! my dear child," said Catherine, "that was wrong; you must set the interests of France before your own small dislikes."

"Is it to the interest of France, mother, that, in case of misfortune happening to my brother, the Duc d'Alençon or Henri de Navarre should come to the throne?"

"The King of Navarre! Never.

never," murmured Catherine, her face clouding with the look of anxious uneasiness which it always wore when this question presented itself.

"Upon my word," continued Henri, "my brother D'Alençon is not much better, and he has no greater love for you than the King of Navarre has."

"But," resumed Catherine, "what did Lasco say?"

"Lasco himself hesitated when I pressed him to demand an audience. Oh! if he could but write to Poland to have this election made null and void!"

"Folly, my son, folly . . . the resolution passed by a Diet is sacred."

"But couldn't the Poles be persuaded to accept my brother in my stead?"

"It would be difficult, if not impossible," answered Catherine.

"Never mind, try; make the attempt speak to the King, mother; lay it all on my love for Madame de Condé; tell him that that love is driving me wild. Why he saw me himself coming out of the Prince's house with Guise, who in this matter is acting the part of a good friend towards me."

"Yes, in order to help on the League you don't see that, but I do."

"Yes, mother, yes; but meanwhile I make use of him. It is a lucky thing when a man who is working for his own ends serves our interests at the same time."

"And what did the King say when he met you?"

"He seemed to believe what I declared to him—namely, that love alone had brought me back to Paris."

"But didn't he ask how you were going to spend the rest of the night?"

"Yes, he did; but I went to supper with Nantouillet, where I behaved most scandalously, with the express purpose that the report of my conduct should get abroad, and that the King should have no doubt but that I had been there."

"Then he is in ignorance of your visit to Lasco?"

"Absolutely so."

"Good; so much the better. I will try to speak to him on your behalf, dear child; but, as you know, it is difficult to exercise any real influence over his impetuous disposition."

"Oh! mother, what happiness it would be, could I remain here; how I should love you more than ever, were that possible!"

"If you remain, you will be sent to the wars again."

"Oh! I don't mind that, provided I do not leave France."

"But you may be killed."

"It isn't blows that kill, mother . . . it is grief, worry, that kills. But Charles will not allow me to remain; he detests me."

"He is jealous of you, my handsome victor, that is the truth of it. Why are you so brave and so fortunate? Why, at the age of scarcely twenty, have you won victories equal to those of Alexander and Cæsar? Meanwhile, however, conceal your thoughts from everybody, pretend to be resigned to the situation, pay your court to the King. A Privy Council will be held this very day to read over and discuss the speeches to be delivered at the ceremony. Play your part as King of Poland, and leave the rest to me. By the bye, what of last night's enterprise?"

"It failed, mother; the gallant lover was warned, and made his escape by the window."

"Ah!" said Catherine, "I shall find out one day who is the evil genius that defeats all my schemes in this way. . . . Meanwhile, I have my suspicions, and . . . woe betide him!"

"Then, mother?" said the Duc d'Anjou.

"Leave me to manage this affair."

And kissing Henri tenderly on the eyes, she pushed him gently from the room.

The Princesses of her household presently visited the Queen-Mother. Charles was in a good temper, for the self-possession exhibited by his sister Margot had pleased rather than annoyed him; he had no other ground of quarrel with La Mole, and had lain in wait for him in the corridor with some eagerness merely because the adventure partook of the nature of the excitement of the chase. D'Alençon, on the other hand, was much preoccupied. The dislike which he had always entertained for La Mole had changed into hatred from the moment he learned that La Mole was the object of his sister's affections.

Marguerite's eyes were on the watch, while her mind was busily employed; it behoved her to reflect and to be on her guard at the same time.

The Polish ambassadors had sent the text of the speeches which they were to deliver. Marguerite, to whom no more mention had been made of the incident of the previous night than if it had not

taken place at all, read these discourses aloud, and everyone, with the exception of Charles, discussed the answer which should be given in each case. Charles allowed Marguerite to answer at her own discretion. He showed himself very difficult to please as regards the expressions to be employed by D'Alençon; with respect, however, to the speech of Henri d'Anjou he did more than find fault; he insisted on its being corrected and rewritten.

This Council, without leading to an open explosion, had the result of embittering many minds.

Henri d'Anjou, who had to compose his speech almost entirely afresh, went off to set about his task. Marguerite, who had had no news of the King of Navarre since that which had been afforded by the breaking of her window-pane, returned to her apartments, in the hope of receiving a visit from him there.

D'Alençon, who had read the hesitation in the eyes of his brother of Anjou, and had intercepted a glance of intelligence exchanged between Anjou and his mother, withdrew in order to ponder over what he considered to be a growing plot. Last of all, Charles was on the point of going to his forge, to finish a hunting-spear which he was making with his own hands, when Catherine stopped him.

Charles, who suspected that he was going to meet with some opposition on the part of his mother, stopped and looked fixedly at her.

"Well!" said he; "what is it now?"

"One last word, Sire; we have forgotten a matter which is of some importance: what day do we fix for the public ceremony?"

"Ah! true," said the King, reseating himself; "let us talk it over, mother. Well, when would you like it to take place?"

"I fancied," answered Catherine, "that there was something of deep calculation in your Majesty's silence and apparent forgetfulness on the point."

"No," said Charles; "why should there be?"

"Because," added Catherine, very gently, "it seemed to me, my son, that we ought not to let these Poles see us rushing after their crown with such avidity."

"On the contrary, mother, it is they who have shown the eagerness, coming here from Warsaw by forced marches.

... We must return honour for honour, politeness for politeness."

"Your Majesty may be quite right in one sense, while in another I may not be wrong. Your opinion is, then, that the public audience should be hurried on?"

"Yes, indeed, mother; don't you agree with me?"

"You know that I have no other opinions than those which may conduce to your honour. I may say, then, that I fear lest, by pressing matters on so quickly, you may be accused of being in a hurry to profit by this opportunity which presents itself of relieving the House of France of the financial burden imposed upon it by your brother, a burden which is certainly compensated for by his devotion to that House and the glory which he reflects upon it."

"Mother," said Charles, "upon his departure from France I will portion my brother so richly that nobody will even dare to *think* what you are afraid they may say."

"Well," said Catherine, "I submit, since you have such a good answer to all my objections. . . But, for the proper reception of the envoys of this warlike nation, which judges the power of States by outward show, you will require a considerable display of troops, and I do not think there is a sufficient number assembled at present in the Ile-de-France."

"Pardon me, mother, I have anticipated this event, and have made preparation for it: I have recalled two battalions from Normandy, and one from Guienne; my company of archers have arrived to-day from Brittany; the Light Horse, who are scattered about Touraine, will be in Paris during the course of the day, and while you imagine that I have hardly four regiments to dispose of, I have in reality twenty thousand men ready to put in an appearance."

"Indeed!" said Catherine, in surprise, "then there is but one thing wanting, but that you will be able to procure."

"What is that?"

"Money. . . I imagine you are not over well supplied."

"On the contrary, Madame, on the contrary," said Charles. "I have fourteen hundred thousand crowns at the Bastille; my private savings during the past few months have amounted to eight hundred thousand crowns, which I have hidden in my cellars at the Louvre, and

in case of emergency, Nantouillet holds three hundred thousand crowns besides at my disposal."

Catherine shuddered; she had often seen Charles violent and passionate, but never had she known him to be provident.

"Come," said she, "it is quite wonderful, your Majesty thinks of everything, and provided that the tailors, the embroiderers, and the jewellers make haste, your Majesty will be in a condition to hold the audience before six weeks are over."

"Six weeks!" exclaimed Charles, "why, the tailors, the embroiderers, and the jewellers have been hard at work since the day we heard of my brother's nomination to the throne. Were it absolutely necessary, all might perhaps be in readiness to-day; but, at all events, everything will be ready in three or four days."

"You are even in a greater hurry than I thought," murmured Catherine.

"Honour for honour, as I told you."

"Very well. It is this honour then done to the House of France which flatters you, is it not?"

"Certainly."

"And it is your dearest wish to see a Son of France on the throne of Poland?"

"You say truly."

"Then the fact is, that you are interested in the thing and not the man, and whoever it be that is made King there. . ."

"No, no, mother; 'od's my life! let things rest where they are! The Poles have made a wise choice. They are strong and clever, those people! A military people and a nation of soldiers, they choose a gallant captain for their Prince, that is quite logical. D'Anjou is just the man for them; the hero of Jarnac and Moncontour will fit them like a glove. . . Whom do you want me to send them? D'Alençon? A coward! That would give them a fine idea of the Valois! . . . D'Alençon! He would run away when the first bullet whistled in his ears, while Henri d'Anjou, a warrior, ever sword in hand, ever in the van, on foot or on horseback! . . . Brave fellow! He pricks, thrusts, knocks on on the head; kills! Ah! my brother of Anjou is a man indeed, a valiant fellow, who will make them fight from morning to night, from the beginning of the year to the end. He limps badly, it is true;

but he will kill them off in cold blood, and that settles it all. The dear Henri will be in his element! Ho! for the battlefield! Bravo trumpets and drums! Long live the King! Long live the victor! Long live the general! He will be proclaimed *imperator* three times over every year! It will be a splendid thing for the House of France and the glory of the Valois . . . He will perhaps get killed, but by the Almighty! 'twill be a glorious death!"

Catherine shuddered, and an angry light flashed from her eyes.

"Say at once," she cried, "that you want to get rid of Henri d'Anjou, that you do not love your brother!"

"Ah!" said Charles, with a nervous laugh, "you have guessed, have you, that I want to get rid of him? You have guessed that I don't love him? Why should I love him? Ha! ha! would you jest? . . ." And as he went on, his pale cheeks lighted with a feverish flush "Does he love me? Do you love me? Is there anyone, except my dogs, and Marie Touchet, and my nurse, who has ever cared for me? No, no, I don't love my brother, I love only myself. Do you hear? And I don't prevent my brother from doing the same as I do."

"Sire," said Catherine, becoming animated in her turn, "since you lay bare your heart to me, I must open mine to you. You are acting as a weak monarch, the victim of unwise counsels; you are sending away your next eldest brother, the natural prop of your throne, who is in all respects worthy to succeed you, should any evil come to you, in which case you leave your crown at sixes and sevens; for, as you were saying, D'Alençon is young, weak, incapable, and worse than that, a coward . . . And behind him, you understand, stands the Prince de Béarn."

"Death and damnation!" cried Charles, "what care I what happens when I am gone? The Prince de Béarn, you say, stands behind my brother? 'Sdeath! so much the better! . . . I said that I loved nobody . . . I was wrong, I love Henriot; yes, I love him, that good Henriot: he has a frank look, a warm hand, while all round me I see only treacherous eyes and touch only cold hands. He is incapable of treason against me, I would swear to it. Besides, I owe

him some compensation: his mother was poisoned, poor fellow! and by members of my own family, I have heard it said. But, if I fell ill, I should summon him, I should not let him leave my side, I should grasp his hand alone, and when I die I will make him King of France and Navarre . . . And, *mordieu!* instead of rejoicing at my death, as my brothers would do, he would weep; or, at least, he would pretend to weep."

A thunderbolt falling at Catherine's feet would have amazed her less than did these words. She remained astounded, staring with wild eyes at Charles; at last, after some moments, she exclaimed:

"Henri de Navarre! Henri de Navarre King, to the prejudice of my own children! Holy Mother! we shall see! It is for this you want to banish my son?"

"Your son . . . and what am I, then? the son of a she-wolf, like Romulus!" cried Charles, quivering with anger and his eyes blazing. "Your son? You are right, the King of France is not your son, the King of France has no brothers, the King of France has no mother, the King of France has only subjects. The King of France does not need to possess feelings, he has his will. He can do without being loved, but be obeyed he will."

"Sire, you have misunderstood my words: when I said 'my son,' I meant him who is about to leave me. I love him best at this moment, because it is he whom at this moment I have the greatest fear of losing. Is it a crime in a mother to desire that her child should not leave her?"

"And I tell you that he shall leave you. I tell you he shall leave France and go to Poland, and that within two days, and if you say a word more it shall be to-morrow; and if you do not drop that threatening look, I will strangle him this evening as you wanted me to strangle your daughter's lover yesterday. Only, I shall not fail in the attempt, as we failed with La Mole."

Under the influence of this first threat Catherine abandoned her determined attitude; but, raising her head again almost immediately, she exclaimed:

"Ah! poor child! your brother wants to kill you; but do not be alarmed, your mother will protect you."

"Ha! you defy me, then!" cried Charles, "very well! he shall die, *mordieu!* not this evening, not presently, but this very instant. Ha! a weapon! a dagger! a knife . . . ! Ha!"

And Charles, after vainly casting his eyes about him to find what he was in search of, noticed the small dagger which his mother wore at her girdle, sprang upon it, tore it from its case of leather embossed with silver, and dashed from the room to strike down Henri d'Anjou, whenever and wherever he might find him. But on reaching the vestibule his strength, excited beyond his powers, suddenly forsook him; he threw up his arms, letting fall the dagger, which stuck quivering in the flooring, uttered an agonising cry, sank down in a heap and rolled over on the floor. At the same moment streams of blood gushed from his nose and mouth.

"My God! they are killing me; help! help!" he cried.

Catherine, who had followed him, saw him fall; for a moment she looked at him without moving; then, recalled to her senses, not by maternal affection, but by the exigencies of the crisis, she called aloud:

"The King is ill! help! help!"

At this cry a number of servitors, officers, and courtiers hurried round the young King. Into the midst of the group rushed a woman, thrusting aside the spectators and lifting in her arms Charles, who was now pale as a corpse.

"They are killing me, nurse, they are killing me," muttered the King, bathed in blood and sweat.

"Killing you! my Charles!" she cried, scanning all the faces with a glance that made even Catherine retreat in dismay, "why! who is killing you?"

Charles gave a feeble sigh and swooned away.

"Ah!" said Ambroise Paré, the physician, who had been immediately summoned, "the King is very ill."

"Now," said the relentless Catherine to herself, "voluntarily or on compulsion, he will have to grant a delay."

And she left the King in order to go to the Duc d'Anjou, who was anxiously awaiting in the Oratory the result of this interview, of such importance to himself.

CHAPTER X

THE HOROSCOPE

UPON leaving the Oratory, where she had just given Henri d'Anjou an account of all that had past, Catherine found René in her apartment.

It was the first occasion on which she and the astrologer had met since the visit which she had paid to his shop on the Pont Saint-Michel; the Queen had written to him, however, on the previous evening, and René was now bringing in person the answer to her letter.

"Well!" she asked, "have you seen him?"

"Yes."

"How is he?"

"Better, if anything."

"And can he speak?"

"No, the sword has pierced the larynx."

"I told you in that case to make him write."

"I tried to do so, and he himself summoned up all his strength for the purpose; but his hand could only trace two letters, almost illegible, and then he fainted. His jugular vein has been severed, and loss of blood has deprived him of all his strength."

"Did you see those two letters?"

"Here they are."

René drew a paper from his pocket and handed it to Catherine, who unfolded it with eagerness.

"An 'M' and an 'O,' said she . . . "that clearly must mean La Mole, and all that little comedy played by Marguerite was merely with the object of averting suspicion."

"Madame," said René, "if I ventured to express my opinion in a matter in which your Majesty hesitates to form your own, I should say that I believe M. de La Mole to be too much in love to trouble his head seriously about political business."

"You think so?"

"Yes, and in particular, too much in love with the Queen of Navarre to serve the King devotedly, for there is no true love without jealousy."

"And you think, then, that he is absolutely in love?"

"I am sure of it."

"Has he had recourse to you?"

"Yes."

"And he asked you for some potion, some philtre?"

"No, we relied on the waxen figure."

"Pierced to the heart?"

"Pierced to the heart."

"Is that figure still in existence?"

"Yes."

"At your house?"

"At my house."

"It would be strange," said Catherine, "if these cabalistic devices really produced the effect which is attributed to them."

"Your Majesty is better able to judge of that than I am."

"Does the Queen of Navarre love M. de La Mole?"

"To the extent of ruining herself for his sake. Yesterday she saved him from death at the risk of her own life and honour. You see, Madame, and yet you still doubt."

"Doubt what?"

"The truth of astrological science."

"Because it has betrayed me," said Catherine, looking fixedly at René, who bore the glance without flinching.

"On what occasion?"

"Oh, you know what I mean; unless, however, it be the professor rather than the science which is at fault."

"I do not know what you mean, Madame," replied the Florentine.

"René, have your perfumes lost their virtue?"

"No, Madame, not when they are employed by myself; but possibly in passing through the hands of others. . ."

Catherine smiled, and shook her head.

"Your paste has acted wonderfully, René," she said, "and Madame de Sauve's lips are fresher and pinker than ever."

"It is not my paste that should be congratulated, Madame, for the Baronne de Sauve, exercising the right of changing her mind which every pretty woman possesses, didn't mention the paste again, while I, after the instructions given me by your Majesty, didn't think it advisable to send it to her. The boxes are still all at my house just as you left them, with the exception of one which has disappeared without my knowing who took it, or for what purpose."

"Very well, René, perhaps we will come back to that later on; meanwhile, let us speak of another matter."

"I am listening, Madame."

"What is required in order to be able

to estimate the probable duration of a person's life?"

"First, to know the day of his birth, his present age, and the planet under which he was born."

"And next?"

"To have some of his hair and blood."

"And if I bring you these things, and give you information as to the other points, can you tell me the probable date of his death?"

"Yes, within a few days."

"Good, I have some of his hair; I will procure some of his blood."

"Was the person born during the day or the night?"

"At twenty-three minutes past five in the evening."

"Be at my house at five o'clock to-morrow: the experiment should be made at the exact hour of his birth."

"Very well," said Catherine, "we will be there."

René bowed and withdrew, without appearing to notice the "we will be there," which, however, indicated that, contrary to her habit, Catherine would not come alone.

The next day, at dawn, Catherine went to the King's room. At midnight she had sent to inquire about him, and had been told that Master Ambroise Paré was with him, and was preparing to bleed him in case the feverish agitation continued the same.

Still starting in his slumbers, still pale from loss of blood, Charles slept on the shoulder of his faithful nurse, who, leaning against the bed, had not altered her position for three whole hours for fear of disturbing the repose of her dear child.

A slight froth appeared on the patient's lips from time to time, which the nurse wiped away with a piece of fine embroidered cambric. On the pillow lay a handkerchief spotted with large stains of blood.

For a moment Catherine entertained the idea of taking possession of this handkerchief, but she thought that this blood, mingled as it was with the saliva which had soaked it, might not have the same efficacy; she asked the nurse if the doctor had not bled the King as he had said that he would do. The nurse answered that he had done so, and that the bleeding had been so copious that Charles had fainted twice during the operation.

The Queen-Mother, who, like all the princesses of that period, had some acquaintance with medicine, asked to see the blood; nothing was easier, the doctor having ordered it to be kept that he might study the special appearance it might present.

It was in a basin in the closet at the side of the bedroom. Catherine went thither to examine it, filled with the red fluid a small bottle which she had brought for that purpose, and then returned, hiding her fingers in her pockets, as their tips would have revealed the profanation of which she had just been guilty.

At the moment when she returned to the room, Charles opened his eyes, and was surprised to see his mother, where-upon recollecting, as after a dream, the malicious scheme which had filled his thoughts:

"Ah! Madame, is it you?" said he: "well, tell your beloved son, your Henri d'Anjou, that it shall be to-morrow."

"My dear Charles," said Catherine, "it shall be any day you please; calm yourself and go to sleep."

Charles, as though acting upon her advice, did actually close his eyes; and Catherine, who had given the advice as one does in order to soothe a patient or a child, left his chamber. But the instant he heard the door close behind her, Charles sat up in bed, and suddenly, in a voice weak and stifled from the effects of the attack from which he was still suffering, exclaimed:

"My Chancellor! the great seals, the Court! . . . summon them all hither."

The nurse, with gentle violence, drew the King's head back upon her shoulders, and in order to put him to sleep again, tried to rock him as when he was a child.

"No, no, nurse, I have slept long enough. Call my people, I want to work this morning."

When Charles spoke in this fashion, there was nothing to do but to obey; and the nurse herself, privileged though she was, dared not resist his order. Accordingly, the persons whom the King wished to see, were summoned to his presence, and an audience was fixed, not for the next day—that was an impossibility—but five days from that time.

At the appointed hour, that is to say, at five o'clock, the Queen-Mother and the Duc d'Anjou, betook themselves to

René, who, anticipating their visit, as we know, had prepared everything in readiness for the mysterious *séance*.

In the chamber on the right, the one employed for the sacrifices, was being heated on a blazing chafing dish a sheet of steel, intended to represent, by its fanciful arabesques, the main incidents of the destiny with regard to which the oracle was to be consulted; on the altar lay the book of Fate, and during the previous night, which had been very bright and clear, René had been able to study the progress and position of the constellations.

Henri d'Anjou was the first to enter; he wore false hair; a mask concealed his face, and a large cloak disguised his figure. Presently, came his mother, and had she not known it was her son who was awaiting her, even she would not have been able to recognise him. Catherine removed her mask; the Duc d'Anjou, on the contrary, retained his.

"Did you take observations last night?" asked Catherine.

"Yes, Madame," said René; "and the answer of the heavenly bodies has already informed me as to the past. He concerning whom you question me is, like all persons born under the sign of Cancer, of a temperament proud and fiery beyond measure. He is powerful; he has lived nearly a quarter of a century, and up to now, Heaven has bestowed upon him riches and glory. Is that so, Madame?"

"Perhaps," said Catherine.

"Have you the hair and the blood?"

"They are here."

And Catherine handed the necromancer a lock of fair hair, and a small bottle full of blood.

René took the bottle, and after shaking it in order to combine the fibrine with the watery particles, poured upon the red-hot metal a large drop, which instantly boiled up, and presently extravasated in fanciful designs.

"Oh! Madame," exclaimed René, "I see him writhe in fearful agony. Hear you how he groans and cries for help! See you how all around him becomes blood? how around his death-bed fierce combats prepare themselves? See, there are lances, there are swords."

"Will the time be long?" asked Catherine, quivering with indescribable emotion, and grasping the hand of Henri d'Anjou, who, in his eager curiosity, was stooping over the brazier.

René approached the altar and repeated a cabalistic prayer, imparting to his action a fire and a conviction which swelled the veins of his temples, and distorted him with the same frenzied convulsions which agitated the ancient priestesses of Apollo at the tripod, and pursued them to their death-beds.

At last he rose and announced that all was ready, took in one hand the bottle, still three parts full, and in the other, the lock of hair; then, bidding Catherine open the book at random and glance at the first sentence that met her eye, he poured all the blood over the steel plate and threw the hair into the brazier, uttering a cabalistic phrase composed of Hebrew words, of whose meaning he was himself utterly ignorant.

Instantly the Duc d'Anjou and Catherine saw a white face, like that of a corpse in its shroud, appear upon the surface.

Another face, apparently that of a woman, rested against the first one.

At the same moment the hair caught fire, and shot forth a single ray of flame, bright, swift, and like a fiery tongue.

"A year!" cried René, "barely a year and this man will be dead, and one woman alone will weep over him. But, no, see down there at the end of the blade, yet another woman, holding what looks like a child in her arms."

Catherine looked at her son, and, mother though she was, seemed to be asking in her jealousy who these two women could be.

But René had hardly finished speaking, when the steel became blank again; the whole picture had gradually faded from view.

Thereupon Catherine opened the book at random, and in faltering tones, which, spite of her power of self-control, she was unable to steady, read the following distich:

Our dreaded enemy, his life has ended
Untimely—but our need his death demanded.

A profound silence reigned for some moments around the brazier.

"And for the other person—you know whom I mean—" asked Catherine, "what are the signs for this month?"

"Favourable as ever, Madame. Unless destiny be vanquished by a strife between the gods, this man has certainly a great future in store for him. However . . ."

"However, what?"

"One of the stars which compose his constellation has remained during the period of my observations obscured by a dark cloud."

"Ah! a dark cloud . . . then there is some hope," cried Catherine.

"Of whom are you speaking, Madame?" asked the Duc d'Anjou.

Catherine drew her son away from the light of the brazier and spoke to him in a low tone.

Meanwhile René knelt down, and pouring into his hand by the light of the flame a last drop of blood which had remained at the bottom of the phial:

"Strange contradiction," he remarked, "which proves how untrustworthy are the evidences of mere science as practised by ordinary men. To any other man than myself, to a doctor, a professor, to Master Ambroise Paré himself, here is a blood so pure, so fruitful, so full of keenness and animal juices, as to promise long years of life to the body from which it has issued; and yet, all this vigour is doomed shortly to disappear, this life is to be cut short within a year."

Catherine and Henri d'Anjou had come back and were listening. The eyes of the Prince sparkled through his mask.

"The reason is," continued René, "that the present alone belongs to the ordinary professors, while our domain extends over the past and the future."

"So, then," continued Catherine, "you still maintain your belief that he will die before a year has expired?"

"I am as certain of it as that we three now here alive will rest in our turn one day in our coffins."

"You said, however, that the blood was pure and fruitful, that it promised a long life?"

"Yes, supposing that events followed their natural course. But may not some accident . . ."

"Ah! yes, you hear," said Catherine to Henri, "some accident . . ."

"Alas!" said the latter, "that is all the stronger reason why I should remain."

"Oh! as to that, don't think about it, it is an impossibility."

The Duke now turned to René, and disguising the tone of his voice, said to him:

"Thank you; take this purse."

"Come, Comte," said Catherine, purposely calling her son by a title which would baffle the perfumer's conjectures.

And they left the house.

"You see, mother," said Henri, "an accident! . . . and should this accident occur, I shall not be here; I shall be four hundred leagues away from you . . ."

"Four hundred leagues can be done in a week, my son."

"Yes, but who knows if these people will let me go back? Mother, can't I wait? . . ."

"Who knows?" said Catherine; "this accident of which René speaks may perhaps be the one which laid the King upon a bed of sickness yesterday. Listen, my child, go to the Palace by your own entrance; I will go by the little gate in the cloister of the Augustinians; my attendants are waiting for me in the Convent. Go on, Henri, and be careful not to annoy your brother, if you see him."

CHAPTER XI

CONFESSIONS

THE first thing the Duc d'Anjou heard on his arrival at the Louvre was that the state entry of the Ambassadors was fixed to take place in five days' time. The tailors and jewellers were awaiting the Prince with magnificent robes and superb ornaments, which the King had ordered for him.

While he was trying them on with a feeling of anger which filled his eyes with tears, Henri de Navarre was diverting himself with a splendid collar of emeralds, a gold-hilted sword, and a costly ring, which Charles had sent him that very morning.

D'Alençon had just received a letter, and had shut himself up in his room in order to read it in quiet.

As for Coconnas, he was rousing the echoes of the Louvre with inquiries for his missing friend.

In point of fact, Coconnas, as may well be supposed, though not much surprised at not seeing La Mole return all night, had begun to grow somewhat uneasy during the morning; he had consequently started in search of his friend, beginning his investigation with the *Belle-Etoile*, going on from there to the Rue Cloche-Percée, from the Rue Cloche-Percée to

the Rue Tizon, from the Rue Tizon to the Pont Saint-Michel, and lastly, from the Pont Saint-Michel to the Louvre.

His inquiries had been made, in regard to those to whom they were addressed, in a fashion sometimes so original, sometimes so peremptory—as it is easy for those who are acquainted with his eccentric disposition to imagine—that it had caused between himself and three noblemen connected with the Court explanations which had ended in the manner usual at that period, namely, with a visit to the duelling-ground. Coconnas had conducted himself in these encounters as conscientiously as he generally did in affairs of this kind; he had killed his first opponent, and wounded the other two, remarking:

"That poor La Mole, he was such a good Latin scholar."

This constant repetition caused the last of the three, who was the Baron de Boissey, to say, as he fell:

"For the love of heaven, Coconnas, make a little variation; at least tell us that he knew Greek."

Then the adventure in the corridor had come to light, and the report of it overwhelmed Coconnas with grief, since he believed for a time that this band of kings and princes had killed his friend and thrown his body down some oubliette.

On learning that D'Alençon had formed one of the party, he went in search of him, quite regardless of the majesty surrounding a prince of the blood, and demanded an explanation, just as he would have done from an ordinary gentleman.

At first D'Alençon felt greatly inclined to kick out of the room this impertinent fellow who came to demand an account of his actions; but Coconnas spoke in a tone so stern, his eyes blazed so fiercely, his three duels within twenty-four hours had so increased his reputation, that the Duke reflected, and instead of yielding to his first impulse, replied to his gentleman, with a charming smile:

"My dear Coconnas, it is true that the King, in his anger at receiving a silver ewer on his shoulder, the Duc d'Anjou, in his displeasure at getting a compôte of oranges thrown at his head, and the Duc de Guise, humiliated at being hit in the face by a haunch of venison, formed a plot to kill La Mole; but a friend of your

friend's averted the blow, and the plot failed, I give you my princely word."

"Ah!" said Coconnas, breathing like the bellows of a forge at this assurance, "'sdeath, Monseigneur, that is good news, and I should like to know this friend, that I might prove my gratitude to him."

M. d'Alençon did not reply, but smiled even more pleasantly than before, which led Coconnas to infer that this friend was none other than the Prince himself.

"Well, Monseigneur," he replied, "since you have gone so far as to tell me the beginning of the story, complete your kindness by relating its end to me. You tell me they wished to kill him, but did not do so; come, what have they done with him? Speak out; I am brave and can bear to hear bad news. They have thrown him into the depths of some dungeon, is that it? So much the better; it will teach him to be more cautious. He never *will* listen to my advice. Besides, he can be rescued from it; 'sdeath! stones are not hard for everybody."

D'Alençon shook his head.

"The worst of it all is, my brave Coconnas, that since this adventure your friend has disappeared, and nobody knows where he has gone."

"Zounds!" cried the Piedmontese, turning pale afresh, "I will find out where he is, though he be gone to hell."

"Listen," said D'Alençon, who had as great a desire as Coconnas to know the whereabouts of La Mole, though from different motives, "I will give you a piece of friendly advice."

"Give it, Monseigneur," said Coconnas, "give it,"

"Go and find Queen Marguerite; she will know what has become of him whom you are lamenting."

"If I must confess it to your Highness," said Coconnas, "I had already thought of doing so, but had not the courage; for, besides the fact that Madame Marguerite overawes me more than I can say, I was afraid of finding her in tears. But, since your Highness assures me that La Mole is not dead, and that her Majesty probably knows where he is, I will pluck up courage and go and find her."

"Go, my friend, go," said the Duke, "and if you hear any news, bring word to me also, for I assure you I am as anxious as you are. Only, remember one thing, Coconnas . . ."

"What is that?"

"Don't say that you come from me, for such imprudence might result in your learning nothing."

"Monseigneur," said Coconnas, "since your Highness enjoins secrecy on this point, I will be as dumb as a tench . . . or as the Queen-Mother."

"Good, excellent, magnanimous Prince!" murmured Coconnas, as he made his way to the Queen of Navarre.

Marguerite was expecting him, for the report of his despair had reached her ears, and learning by what courageous exploits that despair had been signalled, she had almost forgiven Coconnas for the rather brutal way in which he was treating her friend, the Duchesse de Nevers, whom the Piedmontese had neglected in consequence of a serious quarrel that had existed between them for the last two or three days. He was accordingly introduced to the Queen's presence as soon as he was announced.

Coconnas came in without being able to overcome that certain degree of embarrassment of which he had spoken to the Duc d'Alençon, and which he always experienced in the presence of the Queen—an embarrassment caused far more by the superiority of her mind than by her rank; but Marguerite received him with a smile which immediately put him at his ease.

"Madame," said he, "I beg you to restore my friend to me, or tell me at least what has become of him, for without him I cannot live. Picture Euryalus without Nisus, Damon without Pythias, or Orestes without Pylades, and take pity on my misfortune. I beseech you in the name of the heroes whom I have just quoted, and whose hearts, I swear, did not surpass mine in loving affection."

Marguerite smiled, and after swearing Coconnas to secrecy, told him of the escape through the window. As to his present place of abode, in spite of the urgent entreaties of the Piedmontese, she preserved the strictest silence. Coconnas was only half satisfied; accordingly, he had recourse to diplomatic hints, which evidently came from a higher quarter. The result was that Marguerite saw clearly that the Duc d'Alençon shared in the desire possessed by his attendant to learn what had become of La Mole.

"Well," said the Queen, "if you are determined to gain positive information with regard to your friend, ask the King

of Navarre, who is the only person who has the right to speak; for myself, I can only tell you that he for whom you are searching is alive; you may believe my word."

"I believe something that is still more trustworthy, Madame," replied Coconnas, "the fact that your lovely eyes have not been weeping."

Then, thinking there was nothing to add to a phrase which had the double advantage of expressing his thoughts, as well as the high opinion he held of the merits of La Mole, Coconnas withdrew, meditating over a patching up of matters with Madame de Nevers, not for her own sake, but in order to find out from her what he could not learn from Marguerite.

Great griefs constitute abnormal situations, the burden of which the mind shakes off as soon as possible. The thought of leaving Marguerite had at first nearly broken La Mole's heart; and it was far more with a view to preserving the Queen's reputation than of saving his own life that he had consented to fly.

Accordingly, he had returned to Paris on the evening of the next day in order to see Marguerite again at her balcony. Marguerite, for her part, as though some secret voice had apprised her of the young man's return, had passed the whole evening at her window; consequently, they had beheld one another again with that unspeakable joy that accompanies forbidden pleasures. Nay, more: La Mole's melancholy and romantic turn of mind found a certain charm in this misfortune. As the true lover, however, is only happy at the moment when he sees or possesses, and suffers through all the intervals of absence, La Mole, in his ardent longing to see Marguerite once more, busied himself in bringing about as quickly as possible the event which would restore her to him, namely, the flight of the King of Navarre.

As for Marguerite, she in her turn surrendered herself to the happiness of being loved with so pure a devotion. Only, she was annoyed with herself for what she regarded as a weakness; she, with her virile mind, despising the sordidness of ordinary love, insensible to all those trifles which, for tender hearts, make love the sweetest, the most delicate, the most desirable of all delights—she considered her day, if not happily employed, at least ended in happiness, when, appearing at

her balcony towards nine o'clock, clad in a white dressing-gown, she perceived through the darkness on the Quay a cavalier with his hand pressed to his lips or to his heart; then she would give a meaning cough, which recalled to the lover the memory of the beloved voice. Sometimes it would be a note as well, thrown vigorously by a small hand and falling with a ring on the pavement close to the young man's feet, enclosing some costly jewel, much more precious, however, as having belonged to her who sent it than for its intrinsic worth. Then La Mole would swoop down upon this prey like a hawk, plunge it into his bosom, and reply by a similar cough, while Marguerite would not leave the balcony until she had heard the last sounds of the steps of the horse which had been urged to the spot at full gallop, but which, when going away, seemed to be constructed of as sluggish material as the famous horse which proved the ruin of Troy.

This explained why the Queen was not uneasy about the fate of La Mole, to whom, moreover, for fear lest they should be spied upon, she persistently refused any other meeting than these interviews *à l'espagnole*, which had begun directly after his flight, and were repeated on each evening of the days which were spent in waiting for the reception of the ambassadors—which reception had been postponed, as we have seen, for some days by the express direction of Ambroise Paré.

On the evening preceding the reception, towards nine o'clock, when everyone at the Louvre was busy with the preparations for the morrow, Marguerite opened her window and stepped on to the balcony hardly was she there before, without waiting for her letter, La Mole, more hurriedly than usual, threw up his own, which well aimed as always, fell at the feet of his Royal mistress. Marguerite realised that the missive must contain something of special importance, and stepped inside her room to read it.

The first page of the note contained these words:

"Madame, I must speak to the King of Navarre. The matter is urgent. I am waiting."

The second page, which could be detached by separating the two leaves, read as follows:—

"Madame and my Queen, contriv

me an opportunity of giving you one of those kisses which I send you. I am waiting."

Marguerite had hardly read the second part of the letter when she heard the voice of Henri de Navarre, who, with his usual punctilio, knocked at the ordinary door and asked Gillonne if he might enter.

The Queen at once divided the letter in two, placed one of the pages inside her bodice and the other in her pocket, then ran to the window and closed it, and rushing to the door:—

"Come in, Sire," said she.

Softly, swiftly, and adroitly as Marguerite had closed the window, the sound of it had reached the ears of Henri, whose senses, ever on the stretch, had acquired, amid surroundings of which he was so mistrustful, almost the same exquisite delicacy which they acquire among men who live in a savage state. The King of Navarre, however, was not one of those tyrants who would prevent their wives from taking the air and contemplating the stars. He was smiling and gracious as usual.

"Madame," said he, "while our Court folks are trying on their robes of state, it occurred to me to come and exchange a few words with you about my affairs, which you continue, do you not, to regard as your own?"

"Certainly, Sir," replied Marguerite, "are not our interests still identical?"

"Yes, Madame, and that is the reason why I wanted to ask you what you think of the anxiety to avoid me which the Duc d'Alençon has exhibited for the last few days, an anxiety carried to such an extent that the day before yesterday he retired to Saint-Germain. Is not this step on his part either a means of escaping by himself, since he is not very strictly guarded, or a means of not going away at all? Your opinion, Madame, if you please? It will be, I confess, of great weight in confirming my own."

"Your Majesty is right to be uneasy at my brother's silence. I have been thinking of the matter all day, and my opinion is that, circumstances having changed, he has changed with them."

"That is to say, is it not, that, seeing King Charles ill and the Duc d'Anjou King of Poland, he would not be sorry to remain in Paris in order to keep the crown of France in view?"

"Exactly."

"Be it so; I ask nothing better than that he should remain; only, this makes a change in all our plans, for, if I am to go away alone, I shall require thrice the guarantees that I should have asked for, had I been going with your brother, whose name and support in the enterprise would have safe-guarded me. The only thing which surprises me is that I have not heard a word from De Mouy. It is not like him to remain thus without stirring. I suppose you have heard no news of him, Madame . . . ?"

"I, Sir," exclaimed Marguerite, in astonishment; "how could I? . . ."

"Egad! my dear, nothing would be more natural; you were good enough, in order to please me, to save the life of our young friend La Mole. . . . The fellow would seem to have gone to Nantes . . . and when a man goes, why! he may very likely return. . . ."

"Ah! that gives me the key to a puzzle the solution of which I have been searching for in vain," replied Marguerite. "I had left my window open, and on coming into my room, I found lying on the carpet a sort of note."

"Just think of that!" said Henri.

"A note of which at first I did not grasp the meaning, and to which I attached no importance," continued Marguerite; "perhaps I was wrong, and it comes from that quarter."

"Possibly," said Henri; "I might even venture to say, probably. May I see this note?"

"Certainly, Sire," replied Marguerite, handing the King the portion of the letter which she had placed in her pocket.

The King glanced at it.

"Is not that La Mole's writing?" said he.

"I don't know," replied Marguerite; "the hand seems to me to be disguised."

"Never mind, let me read it," said Henri.

And he read:

"Madame, I must speak to the King of Navarre. The matter is urgent. I am waiting."

"Ah! yes," continued Henri . . . "See, he says he is waiting."

"Certainly, I see that," said Marguerite. ". . . But what do you want?"

"Why, zounds! I want him to come."

"To come!" cried Marguerite, fixing her beautiful eyes on her husband in astonishment; "how can you say such a thing, Sir? A man whom the King tried

to kill . . . who is a marked man, threatened . . . you want him to come, you say; is it possible for him to do so? Are doors safe for those who have been . . ."

"Obliged to escape by the window . . . you would say?"

"Exactly; you have completed my thought."

"Well, but, if they know the way through the window, let them take that way, since they cannot come in by the door; that is perfectly simple."

"Do you think so?" said Marguerite, blushing with delight at the thought of meeting La Mole.

"I am sure of it."

"But how can he get up?" asked the Queen.

"Haven't you kept the rope-ladder I sent you? it would not be like your usual foresight, if you have not."

"Yes, Sir, I have."

"Then the thing is done," said Henri.

"What does your Majesty order?"

"Why, it is quite simple," said Henri; "fasten it to your balcony and let it hang down. If it is De Mouy who is waiting—and I am inclined to believe it—and if he wants to come up, our worthy friend will do so."

And without any trace of excitement, Henri took the candle to help Marguerite in her search for the ladder; the search did not last long, the ladder being found in a cupboard inside the famous closet.

"There it is," said Henri; "now, Madame, if I am not asking too much, fasten the ladder, I beg of you, to the balcony."

"Why I and not you, Sir?" said Marguerite.

"Because the cleverest conspirators are the most cautious. The sight of a man might perhaps scare our friend, you understand."

Marguerite smiled, and made fast the ladder. "There," said Henri, remaining concealed in a corner of the room; "show yourself well; now make him see the ladder. Capital; I am certain that De Mouy will come up."

In point of fact, a few minutes later a man in a transport of joy cleared the balcony, and, on seeing that the Queen did not come to meet him, remained for a moment in an attitude of hesitation. But, instead of Marguerite, Henri stepped forward:

"See," said he, graciously, "it is not

De Mouy, but M. de La Mole. Good evening, Monsieur de La Mole; come in, I beg of you."

La Mole remained an instant dumb-founded. Possibly, had he been still clinging to the ladder, instead of having his foot firmly planted on the balcony, he might have tumbled backwards.

"You wished to speak with the King of Navarre on urgent business," said Marguerite; "I sent him word, and here he is."

Henri went to shut the window.

"I love you," said Marguerite, pressing the young man's hand warmly.

"Well, sir," said Henri, offering a chair to La Mole, "what have you to say for yourself?"

"This, Sire—that I have left M. de Mouy at the barrier. He wishes to know if Maurevel has spoken, and if his presence in your Majesty's chamber is known."

"Not yet, but it must be known shortly; therefore we must hasten."

"He shares your opinion, Sire, and if to-morrow evening M. d'Alençon is ready to start, he will be at the Porte Saint-Marcel with a hundred and fifty men; five hundred more will await you at Fontainebleau; you will then make for Blois, Angoulême, and Bordeaux."

"Madame," said Henri, turning to his wife, "I shall be ready to-morrow for my part; shall you be ready also?"

La Mole's eyes were fastened on Marguerite with profound anxiety.

"You have my word," said the Queen; "where you go, I follow; but, you know, M. d'Alençon must start at the same time that we do. There is no middle course with him; either he serves us or he betrays us; if he hesitates, we must not stir."

"Does he know anything of this scheme, Monsieur de La Mole?" asked Henri.

"He must have received a letter some days ago from M. de Mouy."

"Ah!" said Henri, "he said nothing of it to me."

"Do not trust him, Sir," said Marguerite, "do not trust him!"

"Make your mind easy, I am on your guard. How are we to convey an answer to De Mouy?"

"Have no uneasiness, Sire. To right or to left of your Majesty, visible or invisible, he will be there to-morrow during the reception of the Ambassadors: a few words inserted in the Queen's address will let him understand whether you con-

sent or not, whether he should fly or wait for you. Should the Duc d'Alençon refuse, he only requires a fortnight in which to reorganise the whole scheme in your name."

"De Mouy is, indeed, a valuable man. Can you insert such a sentence in your address, Madame?"

"Nothing easier," answered Marguerite.

"Then I will see M. d'Alençon to-morrow," said Henri; "let De Mouy be in his place and prepared to take the hint."

"He will be there, Sire."

"Well, Monsieur de La Mole," said Henri, "convey to him my answer. You doubtless have a servant and a horse at hand?"

"Orthon is waiting for me on the Quay."

"Go and join him, Comte. No, not by the window: that is all very well in an emergency. You might be seen, and as people wouldn't know that it was on my account you were thus running risks, you might compromise the Queen."

"But how shall I go, Sire?"

"Though you cannot enter the Louvre unaccompanied, you can go out of it with me since I have the countersign. We have each our cloaks, we will wrap ourselves in them, and we shall pass the wicket without difficulty. Besides, I should like to give some private instructions to Orthon. Wait here, I will go and see if there is anyone in the corridors."

Henri went off in the most natural manner to explore the road; La Mole remained alone with the Queen.

"Ah! when shall I see you again?" said La Mole.

"To-morrow evening if we make our escape; if not, one of these evenings, in the house in the Rue Cloche-Percée."

"Monsieur de La Mole," said Henri, coming into the room again, "you can come, there is nobody about."

La Mole bowed respectfully to the Queen.

"Give him your hand to kiss, Madame," said Henri; "Monsieur de La Mole is no ordinary servitor."

Marguerite obeyed.

"By the bye," said Henri, "wind up the rope-ladder carefully; it is a valuable bit of property for conspirators, and we may need it at some moment when we least expect. Come, Monsieur de La Mole, come."

CHAPTER XII

THE ENVOYS

NEXT day the entire population of Paris betook itself towards the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, by which it had been decided that the Polish Ambassadors should make their entry. A double line of Swiss kept back the crowd, and detachments of cavalry escorted the lords and ladies of the Court who went to meet the procession.

Presently there appeared, opposite the Abbey of Saint-Antoine, a band of horsemen dressed in red and yellow, with furred cloaks and caps, and carrying broad curved sabres resembling Turkish scimitars. The officers rode on the flanks of the squadron.

Behind this first troop came a second, equipped with a splendour truly Oriental. This troop preceded the Ambassadors, who, four in number, were magnificent representatives of the chivalry of that kingdom of which less perhaps was known in the sixteenth century than of any other country in Europe.

One of these ambassadors was the Bishop of Cracow. He wore a costume half-ecclesiastical, half-military, resplendent with gold and jewels. His white horse with its long flowing mane and high action, seemed to breathe out flames through its nostrils; nobody would have imagined that for the last month the noble animal had travelled fifteen leagues a day on roads which the bad weather had rendered almost impassable.

Beside the Bishop rode the Palatine Lasco, a powerful nobleman so closely connected with the crown that he possessed both the wealth and haughtiness of a King.

Behind the two chief Ambassadors, who were accompanied by other Palatines of high birth, came a number of Polish nobles, whose steeds, caparisoned in silk housings adorned with gold and jewels, aroused ardent admiration on the part of the populace. To tell the truth, the French horsemen, notwithstanding the richness of their apparel, were completely eclipsed by these new arrivals, to whom they alluded contemptuously as barbarians.

Until the eleventh hour, Catherine had

entertained the hope that the reception would be again postponed and that the King's decision would give way to his weakness, which still continued. But when the day had come and she saw Charles, his face of ghostly paleness, assume his splendid cloak of state, she realised that she must bend, outwardly at least, before that iron will of his, and she began to think that perhaps the safest course for Henri d'Anjou was to go into that magnificent exile to which he was condemned.

Apart from the few words which he had uttered on opening his eyes just when his mother was leaving his closet, Charles had not spoken to Catherine since the scene which had brought about the attack to which he had nearly succumbed. Everyone at the Louvre knew that a terrible altercation had taken place between them, although they were ignorant of what had caused the outbreak, and the boldest quailed in the presence of this coldness and this silence, as birds cower beneath the ominous calm which precedes the storm.

All preparations, however, had been made at the Louvre, not, it is true, as though for a festal occasion, but as if for some mournful ceremony. Everyone had yielded a sullen and passive obedience. Catherine was known to have almost trembled, and everybody else trembled accordingly.

The great reception-hall of the Palace had been prepared, and as audiences of this nature were generally public, the guards and sentries had received orders to allow the admission, together with the ambassadors, of as many of the populace as the apartments and courtyards could contain.

As for Paris, its appearance was much the same as that great city always presents under similar circumstances; eagerness and curiosity, that is to say, were the predominant features. Anyone, however, who had closely scrutinised the population of the capital that day, would have noticed, amid the groups of ordinary gaping citizens, a good number of men enveloped in large cloaks, who communicated with one another by glances, or by gestures of the hand, if at a distance, and who exchanged a few hasty and significant words whenever they met. These men, moreover, seemed greatly interested in the procession, followed close in its

rear, and appeared to take their orders from a venerable old man, whose dark and piercing eyes, spite of his white beard and grizzled eyebrows, denoted a youthful activity. In point of fact, this old man, whether by his own exertions, or aided by the efforts of his companions, succeeded in being one of the first to slip within the Louvre, and, thanks to the complacency of the Commander of the Swiss, a worthy Huguenot, who, spite of his recent conversion, was but little of a Catholic, found means to place himself behind the Ambassadors, immediately opposite Marguerite and Henri de Navarre.

Henri, who had been warned by La Mole that De Mouy would, under some disguise or other, be present at the audience, threw his eyes in every direction. At last his gaze met that of the old man, and remained rivetted upon him; a sign from De Mouy settled all doubt on the part of the King. For De Mouy was so successfully disguised, that even Henri had hesitated to believe that this old man with the white beard could be identical with that intrepid leader of the Huguenots, who, five or six days previously, had offered such a heroic resistance.

A word uttered by Henri in Marguerite's ear fixed the Queen's glance upon De Mouy. Presently her beautiful eyes wandered to the furthest recesses of the hall, vainly searching for La Mole; but La Mole was not there.

The speeches commenced, the first being that addressed to King Charles. Lasco, in the name of the Diet, asked his consent to the offer of the crown of Poland being made to a prince of the House of France.

Charles signified his assent in short and formal terms, presenting to the Polish envoys, his brother, the Duc d'Anjou, whose courage he highly eulogised. He spoke in French, an interpreter translating his reply after every sentence. And each time that the interpreter was speaking, Charles might have been seen to put his handkerchief to his lips, and withdraw it tinged with blood.

When the King's reply was ended, Lasco turned with a bow towards the Duc d'Anjou, and began a Latin address, in which he offered him the throne in the name of the Polish people.

The Duke replied in the same language, and, in a voice whose emotion he strove vainly to conceal, accepted with gratitude

the honour which had been bestowed upon him. While he was speaking, Charles remained standing, with his lips compressed, his eyes fastened menacingly, like those of an eagle, upon the Duke.

When the Duke had ended, Lasco took the crown of the Jagellons, which was reposing on a red velvet cushion, and, while two Polish noblemen clothed the Duc d'Anjou in the regal mantle, placed it in the hands of Charles.

Charles motioned to his brother. The Duke came and knelt before him, and Charles with his own hands placed the crown upon his head; whereupon the two Monarchs exchanged a kiss more full of hatred than had ever been given by two brothers.

Immediately a herald proclaimed:

"Alexandre-Edouard-Henri of France, Duc d'Anjou, has just been crowned King of Poland. Long live the King of Poland!"

The whole assembly shouted with one voice: "Long live the King of Poland!"

Lasco now turned to Marguerite. The speech of the fair Queen had been kept until the last. Now, as this compliment had been accorded her in order to give an opportunity for her remarkable genius to display itself, everyone waited eagerly for the reply, which would be in Latin. We have seen that Marguerite had composed it herself.

The discourse of Lasco was rather a eulogy than an address. Sarmatian though he was, he had yielded to the admiration inspired by the fair Queen of Navarre in all who met her; and borrowing his language from Ovid, but his style from Ronsard, he said that, having set out from Warsaw amid profound darkness, he and his companions could not have found their way unless, like the Magi, they had been guided by two stars—stars which grew in brilliancy as they drew nearer France, and which they now recognised to have been none other than the bright eyes of the Queen of Navarre. Then, passing from the Gospel to the Koran, from Syria to Arabia Petræa, from Bethlehem to Mecca, he ended by saying that he was quite prepared to follow the example of the ardent votaries of the Prophet, who, having once had the good fortune to gaze upon his tomb, put out their eyes, deeming that, after the enjoyment of such a beautiful sight, nothing on earth was any longer worth the trouble of admiring.

This address was greeted with applause on the part of those who spoke Latin, because they shared the orator's sentiments, and on the part of those who did not understand Latin, because they wished to appear to understand it.

Marguerite first of all made a gracious reverence to the gallant Sarmatian; then, while replying to the Ambassador, she fixed her eyes upon De Mouy and began as follows:

"Quod nunc hac in aula insperati adestis exultavimus ego et conjux, nisi ideo immineret calamitas, scilicet non solum fratris sed etiam amici orbitas."^o

These words were susceptible of two meanings, and, while addressed to De Mouy, were equally applicable to Henri d'Anjou. The latter, accordingly, bowed in token of recognition.

Charles did not remember having read this sentence in the speech which had been submitted to him a few days earlier; but he did not attach great importance to Marguerite's words, knowing her address to be one of courtesy, merely. Besides, he did not understand Latin at all well.

Marguerite continued:

"Adeo dolemur a te dividi ut tecum proficisci maluissemus. Sed idem fatum quo nunc sine ulla mora Lutetia cedere juberis, hac in urbe detinet. Proficiscere ergo, frater; proficiscere, amico; proficiscere sine nobis; proficiscentem sequuntur spes et desideria nostra."[†]

It may easily be guessed that De Mouy listened with profound attention to these words, which, though nominally addressed to the Ambassadors, were spoken for him alone. Henri had already turned his head on his shoulders two or three times in a negative fashion, to make the young Huguenot understand that D'Alençon had refused; but this action, which might have been due to accident, would have seemed insufficient to De Mouy, had not

•"Your unexpected presence at this Court would delight my husband and myself, did it not involve a great misfortune, namely, the loss not only of a brother, but likewise of a friend."

†"We are distressed at being parted from you, when we should have preferred to go with you. But the same fate which bids you quit Paris without delay, keeps us prisoners in this city. Go then, dear brother; go, dear friend; go without us. Our hopes and good wishes accompany you."

Marguerite's words come to confirm it. Well, while he was looking at Marguerite, and listening with eager attention, his dark eyes, gleaming beneath their grizzled brows, struck Catherine, who started as though she had received an electric shock, and found herself unable to turn her eyes away from that part of the hall.

"That is a strange face!" she murmured, still keeping her countenance composed in accordance with the requirements of ceremonial etiquette—"Who is that man who is looking so earnestly at Marguerite, and whom she and Henri seem to look at with equal earnestness?"

The Queen of Navarre, however, continued her speech, which, after the introduction given above, went on to reply to the compliments of the Polish envoy, while Catherine was racking her brains to discover the name of this handsome old man, when the Master of the Ceremonies, approaching her from behind, handed her a scented satin bag containing a paper folded in four. Opening the bag, she drew out the paper and read these words:

"Maurevel, by the help of a cordial which I have just given him, has at last regained some strength, and has succeeded in writing the name of the man who was in the King of Navarre's room. The man was De Mouy."

"De Mouy!" thought the Queen; "well, I had a presentiment of it. But this old man . . . Why! *cospetto* . . . this old man is . . ."

Catherine remained with staring eyes and gaping mouth.

Then, bending towards the Captain of the Guard, who was standing beside her:

"Look, Monsieur de Nancy," she said to him, "but don't appear to do so; look at Count Lasco, the man who is speaking at this moment. Behind him . . . yes, there . . . do you see an old man with a white beard, in a black velvet doublet?"

"Yes, Madame," replied the Captain.

"Good; don't lose him out of your sight."

"The man to whom the King of Navarre is making signs?"

"Exactly. Station yourself with ten men at the gate of the Louvre, and when he goes out, invite him from the King to dinner. If he follows you, conduct him to a room and keep him a prisoner. If

he resists, seize him alive or dead. Go, go."

Fortunately, Henri, who was not paying great attention to Marguerite's speech, had fastened his eyes on Catherine, and had not lost a single expression of her features. On seeing the Queen-Mother's glance fixed with such tenacity upon De Mouy, he became uneasy, and when he perceived her give an order to the Captain of the Guard, he understood all.

It was at this moment that he made the signal observed by M. de Nancy, and which, in the language of signs, meant to say: "You are discovered, make your escape instantly!"

De Mouy understood the gesture which emphasised so well the portion of her speech which Marguerite had addressed to him. Not waiting to be told twice, he melted into the crowd and disappeared.

Henri, however, did not lose his uneasiness until he had seen M. de Nancy return to Catherine, and had gathered from the contraction of the Queen-Mother's brow that the Captain of the Guard had been too late to execute her order. The audience was over. Marguerite was still exchanging some unofficial remarks with Lasco.

The King staggered to his feet, bowed, and went out, leaning on the shoulder of Ambroise Paré, who had not quitted him since the beginning of his illness.

Catherine, pale with anger, and Henri dumb with sorrow, followed him.

As for the Duc d'Alençon, he had completely effaced himself during the ceremony, and the King's glance, which had remained fixed on the Duc d'Anjou during the whole time, had not once been directed towards him.

The new King of Poland felt himself lost. Torn from his mother by these barbarians of the North, he resembled Antæus, son of Earth, whose strength forsook him when grasped by the arms of Hercules. Once across the frontier the Duc d'Anjou regarded himself as excluded for ever from the throne of France. Instead, therefore, of following the King, he retired to his mother's room.

He found her no less gloomy and preoccupied than himself, for she was thinking of that keen and mocking face, of which she had not lost sight during the whole ceremony, of that Béarnais for

whom Destiny seemed to be making room by sweeping from his path Kings, Princes, assassins, foes, and obstacles of every kind.

Seeing her beloved son, in his crown and royal mantle, looking so pale and woe-begone, holding out in silent entreaty those delicate hands which he had inherited from herself, Catherine rose and went to him.

"Oh! mother," cried the King of Poland, "behold me condemned to die in exile!"

"My son," said Catherine, "have you so soon forgotten René's prediction? Be of good cheer, you will not remain there long."

"Mother, I conjure you," said the Duc d'Anjou, "on the first breath of suspicion that the throne of France may be vacant, send me warning . . ."

"Make your mind easy, my son," said Catherine; "until the day for which we are both waiting arrives, there will always be in my stables a horse ready saddled, and in my ante-chamber a messenger prepared to start for Poland."

CHAPTER XIII

ORESTES AND PYLADES

WITH the departure of Henri d'Anjou, you would have said that peace and happiness had returned to the Louvre to sit round the hearth of this family of the Atridæ.

Charles, forgetting his melancholy, recovered his vigorous health, going out hunting with Henri, and conversing with him about the chase on the days when they could not hunt, having only one fault to find with him, namely, that he did not care about fowling, and saying that he would be a faultless Prince if only he knew how to train falcons and piercels as well as he could train brachyounds and hunting dogs.

Catherine had begun once more to play the part of the kind mother, tender to Charles and D'Alençon, caressing to Henri and Marguerite, gracious to Madame de Nevers and Madame de Sauve; nay, under the pretext that it

was while accomplishing an order from her that he had been wounded, she had extended her kindness of heart so far as to pay two visits to the now convalescent Maurevel at his house in the Rue de la Cerisaie.

Marguerite continued her love making à l'espagnole. Each evening she opened her window and communicated with La Mole by signs or by writing; and in each of his letters the young man reminded his fair Queen that, as a reward for his banishment, she had promised him a meeting in the Rue Cloche-Percée.

One person alone had become lonely and disconsolate in the Louvre, which was now once more so tranquil and peaceful.

This person was our friend the Comte Hannibal de Coconnas.

Certainly, it was something to know that La Mole was alive; it was much to be still the favoured lover of Madame de Nevers, the most smiling and capricious of women. But all the happiness resulting from the intimacy allowed him by the beautiful Duchess, all the satisfaction of mind given by Marguerite to Coconnas in regard to the fate of their common friend, were not so valuable in the eyes of the Piedmontese as one hour spent with La Mole at the *Belle-Etoile* before a flagon of good wine, or one of those dissolute expeditions to those haunts of Paris where a decent gentleman might get his purse, his doublet, or his skin slashed.

Madame de Nevers—to the shame of humanity be it confessed—bore very impatiently this rivalry with La Mole. Not that she disliked the Provençal, quite the contrary; urged by that irresistible instinct which inclines every woman involuntarily to play the coquette with another woman's lover, especially if that woman be her friend, she had not spared La Mole the glances of her emerald eyes, and Coconnas might have been jealous of the hearty hand-shakes and expenditure of kindness bestowed by the Duchess on his friend, during those moments of caprice when the star of the Piedmontese seemed to wane in the sky of his fair mistress. But Coconnas, who would have despatched a dozen men for the sake of one glance from his lady, was so little jealous of La Mole that he had often whispered in his ear, in consequence of the inconsistencies of the Duchess, certain

offers which had made the Provençal blush.

The result of this state of things was that Henriette—whom the absence of La Mole deprived of all the advantages which the society of Coconnas afforded her, namely, his inexhaustible gaiety and his insatiable liking for pleasure—came one day to find Marguerite in order to entreat her to restore to her this necessary third person, in whose absence Coconnas's flow of spirits was evaporating day by day.

Marguerite, ever sympathetic, and moreover urged by the entreaties of La Mole and the longings of her own heart, gave Henriette an appointment for the next day at the house with the two doors, in order to have a thorough discussion of these matters in a conversation which nobody would be able to interrupt.

Coconnas received with a very bad grace the note from Henriette summoning him to the Rue Tizon at half-past nine. He set out none the less for the place of meeting, where he found Henriette already in a state of anger at having arrived before him.

"For shame! sir," said she, "what bad manners to keep—I will not say a Princess—but a woman waiting like this!"

"Waiting, forsooth!" said Coconnas, "that is a word always in your mouth; I will wager, on the contrary, that we are before the time."

"I am, yes."

"Bah! so am I; it is ten o'clock at the most, I'll be bound."

"Well! my note said half-past nine."

"Yes, and I left the Louvre at nine, for I am on duty with the Duc d'Alençon, let me say in passing; so that I shall be obliged to leave you within an hour."

"At which you are delighted?"

"Upon my word, no, for he is a master very hard to please, and fanciful; and if there is to be any fault-finding, I prefer it to come through pretty lips like yours rather than from an ugly mouth like his."

"Come!" said the Duchess, "that's a little better, however! . . . You were saying that you left the Louvre at nine?"

"Yes, i'faith! with the intention of coming here straight, but at the corner of the Rue de Grenelle I noticed a man resembling La Mole."

"Of course! La Mole again."

"Yes, always, with or without permission."

"You brute!"

"Capital!" said Coconnas, "we are going to begin our paying of compliments again."

"No, but finish your story."

"It isn't I who wanted to tell it, but you who asked me why I was late."

"Of course, is it my place to arrive first?"

"Ah! but you haven't to be searching for anybody."

"You are tiresome, my friend; but go on—At the corner of the Rue de Grenelle you met a man resembling La Mole . . . But what is that on your doublet? is it blood!"

"Eh! why that is another one who must have splashed me as he fell."

"You have been fighting?"

"I should think so."

"For your La Mole?"

"For whom would you expect me to fight? for a woman?"

"Thanks!"

"I accordingly pursued this man, who had the impudence to borrow my friend's appearance. I caught him up in the Rue Coquillière, stepped in front of him and had a good look at him by the light of a shop-window. It was not La Mole."

"Good! there was an end of *that* affair."

"Yes, but he got into trouble over it. 'Monsieur'—said I to him—'you are a coxcomb for permitting yourself to resemble at a distance my friend M. de La Mole, who is an accomplished cavalier; while you, on a closer view, are seen to be nothing but a vagabond.' Upon which, he laid his hand on his sword and I on mine. At the third pass he had the bad manners to splash me as he fell."

"At least you brought him aid?"

"I was going to do so when a horseman rode by. Ah! Duchess, this time I was certain it was La Mole. Unfortunately the horse was going at a gallop I began to pursue the horse, and the people who had gathered to see me fight began to pursue me. Well, as I might have been taken for a thief, followed as I was by all this mob yelping on my tracks I was obliged to turn round to drive them off, which delayed me for a short space. Meanwhile the rider had disappeared. I continued my chase, I asked questions I mentioned the colour of the horse, but all to no purpose; nobody had noticed him. At last, I reluctantly came on here."

"Reluctantly!" said the Duchess "you are very polite!"

"Listen, dear friend," said Coconnas, carelessly throwing himself into a chair, "you mean to persecute me still with regard to this poor La Mole; well! you will make a mistake; for friendship, mark you . . . (I wish I had my poor friend's brains and knowledge, I should find some illustration with which to impress my thought upon you) friendship, mark you, is a star, while love . . . love . . . stop, I have it . . . love is only a candle. You will tell me there are several kinds . . ."

"Of love?"

"No! of candles, and that some of them are preferable to others: the pink, for instance . . . go for the pink . . . is the best; but, pink though it be, the candle burns out, while the star shines for ever. So that you will reply that when the candle is used up, you can put another in the candlestick."

"Monsieur de Coconnas, you are a foxcomb."

"La!"

"Monsieur de Coconnas, you are a saucy fellow."

"La! la!"

"Monsieur de Coconnas, you are a rogue."

"Madame, I warn you that you will make me regret La Mole three times as much as before."

"You love me no longer."

"On the contrary, Duchess, you know nothing about it; I worship you. But I can love you and worship you, and yet in my idle moments sing the praises of my friend."

"Then you call those *idle* moments which you spend in my company?"

"What would you! that poor La Mole, he is ever present to my thoughts."

"You prefer him to me; it is monstrous! Look here, Hannibal, I hate you. Have the courage to be frank, and tell me that you prefer him to me. Hannibal, I warn you that if you prefer anyone in the world to me . . ."

"Henriette, loveliest of Duchesses! for your own peace of mind, I advise you not to put indiscreet questions. I love you more than all women, but I love La Mole better than all men."

"Well answered," said a strange voice all of a sudden.

And a damask curtain lifted from before a large panel, which, sliding in the thickness of the wall, opened a com-

munication between the two rooms, exposed to view La Mole enframed within this doorway, like some fine portrait by Titian in its gilded frame.

"La Mole!" cried Coconnas, without noticing Marguerite, or giving himself time to thank her for the surprise which she had contrived for him; "La Mole, my friend, my dear La Mole!"

And he rushed into his arms, upsetting the chair in which he had been sitting, and the table which stood in his way.

La Mole warmly returned the embrace; but even as he did so, he observed to the Duchesse de Nevers:

"Forgive me, Madame, if the mention of my name between you has at all disturbed your friendly relations: assuredly"—he added, glancing with unspeakable tenderness at Marguerite—"it has not been my fault that I have not seen you sooner."

"You see, Henriette, that I have kept my word," said Marguerite: "here he is."

"Is it to the entreaties of Madame la Duchesse alone that I owe this happiness, then?" asked La Mole.

"To her entreaties alone," answered Marguerite.

Then, turning to La Mole:

"La Mole," she continued, "I allow you to disbelieve every word I say."

Meanwhile Coconnas, who had pressed his friend to his heart a dozen times, had walked round him a score of times, and held a candlestick to his face in order to have a better look at him, went and knelt down before Marguerite, and kissed the hem of her robe.

"Ah! that is fortunate," said the Duchesse de Nevers, "now, perhaps, you will find me endurable."

"Sdeath!" cried Coconnas, "I shall find you adorable as ever; only, I can now tell you with a better heart—and I should like to have here some thirty Poles, Sarmatians, and other barbarians of the North, to make them confess the same thing—that you are the queen of beautiful women."

"Here! gently, gently, Coconnas," said La Mole, "and what of Madame Marguerite, then!"

"Oh! I won't unsay it," cried Coconnas, in the droll tone peculiar to himself, "Madame Henriette is the Queen of Belles, and Madame Marguerite the Belle of Queens."

But, say or do what he might, the

Piedmontese, thinking of nothing but the joy of having recovered his dear La Mole, had no eyes except for him.

"Come, come, fair Queen," said Madame de Nevers, "let us leave these friends to have an hour's chat together; they have a thousand things to say which would interfere with our conversation. It is hard upon us, but, I warn you, it is the only remedy which can restore M. Hannibal completely to health. Do this for me, then, my Queen, since I am foolish enough to love that ugly head, as his friend La Mole says."

Marguerite whispered some words to La Mole, who, desirous as he had been to see his friend again, could have wished that the latter's affection were somewhat less exacting. . . . Meanwhile, Coconnas was endeavouring, by dint of protestation, to bring back a kind smile and a tender word to the lips of Henriette; a result at which he arrived without much difficulty.

The two ladies then passed into the room at the side, where supper awaited them.

The two friends remained alone.

The first details which Coconnas asked his friend were, as you may suppose, those of the fatal evening that had nearly cost him his life. As La Mole proceeded with his narrative, the Piedmontese, who, as we know, was not given to emotion in regard to such affairs, shuddered through all his limbs.

"And why," he asked him, "instead of rushing into the country as you did, and causing me all this anxiety, why didn't you take refuge with our master? The Duke, who had protected you, would have concealed you. I should have lived near you, and my sorrow, although feigned, would none the less have deceived the simpletons at Court."

"Our master!" said La Mole, in a low tone, "the Duc d'Alençon?"

"Yes; after what he told me, I am bound to believe that it is to him you owe your life."

"I owe my life to the King of Navarre," replied La Mole.

"Oho!" said Coconnas, "are you sure of that?"

"I have no doubt whatever."

"Oh! the good, the excellent King! But the Duc d'Alençon, what was he doing in all this?"

"He held the cord to strangle me with."

"'Sdeath," cried Coconnas, "are you sure of what you say, La Mole? What! that pale Prince, that pitiful cur, strangle my friend! Ah! 'sdeath! to-morrow I will tell him what I think of his conduct."

"Are you mad?"

"True, he would make another attempt . . . But no matter, the affair shall not end there."

"Come, come, Coconnas, calm yourself and try not to forget that it has just struck half-past eleven, and that you are on duty to-night."

"Much I care about my duty! Ah! let him reckon upon it! My duty! I serve a man who held the cord . . . You are joking . . . No! . . . Providence has arranged it; it is decreed that I was to find you in order not to leave you again. I shall remain here."

"But, unhappy man, reflect; you are not drunk."

"Luckily; for if I were I should go and set fire to the Louvre."

"Come, Hannibal, be reasonable, and go back. Service is a sacred thing."

"Will you go back with me?"

"Impossible."

"Are they still thinking of killing you?"

"I don't believe so. I am of too little importance for them to have arranged a formal plot against me. In a moment of caprice they wanted to kill me, that is all; the Princes were in a merry mood that evening."

"What are you doing, then?"

"I, nothing; merely roaming about."

"Well, I will roam like you; it is a delightful mode of life. Then, if you should be attacked, there will be two of us, and they will have their work cut out for them. Let your insect of a Duke come! I will flatten him against the wall like a butterfly."

"But ask him for a holiday, at least."

"Yes, a holiday without any limit."

"Give him notice that you are leaving him, in that case."

"Yes, that is only fair; I consent. I will write to him."

"That is rather presumptuous," said Coconnas, "to write to a Prince of Blood."

"Of the blood! yes, the blood of my friend. You don't suppose," cried Coconnas, rolling his eyes in that fashion, "that I am going to bother about matters of etiquette."

"As a matter of fact," said La Mole,

himself, "in a few days there will be no need of the Prince, or of anybody else; or if he is willing to come with us, we shall take him."

Coconnas accordingly took his pen without any further opposition on the part of his friend, and produced with great fluency the following eloquent composition:—

"MONSEIGNEUR,—

"Your Highness is too well acquainted with the classical authors to be ignorant of the pathetic story of Orestes and Pylades, two heroes famous for their misfortunes and friendship. My friend La Mole is no less unfortunate than Orestes, and I am no less affectionate than Pylades. La Mole has important business on hand at the present moment which claims my help, and therefore it is impossible for me to leave him. Consequently, with the permission of your Highness, I am taking a short leave of absence, being determined to attach myself to his fortunes, wherever they may lead me; your Highness will understand how imperative is the necessity which drags me from your service, and for this reason I do not despair of obtaining your forgiveness, and venture to continue to style myself, Monseigneur,

Your most humble and obedient servant,

"HANNIBAL, COMTE DE COCONNAS,
The inseparable friend of M. de La Mole."

Having completed this masterpiece, Coconnas read it in a loud voice to La Mole, who shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Coconnas, not observing this movement, or pretending not to do so.

"I think," replied La Mole, "that M. d'Alençon will laugh at us."

"At us?"

"At both of us."

"Even that is better, it seems to me, than strangling each of us separately."

"Bah!" said La Mole, laughing, "the one thing will perhaps not prevent the other."

"Well! so much the worse! Come what may, I shall send the letter to-morrow morning. Where are we going to sleep when we leave this?"

"With Master La Hurière. In that little room, you know, where you tried to stab me, before we were Orestes and Pylades."

"Very well, I will get mine host to deliver my letter at the Louvre."

At this moment the panel slid back.

"Well! where are Orestes and Pylades?" asked both the ladies, simultaneously.

"'Sdeath! Madame," answered Coconnas, "Orestes and Pylades are dying of hunger and love."

La Hurière did, in point of fact, at nine o'clock next morning, convey Hannibal's respectful missive to the Louvre.

CHAPTER XIV

ORTHON

HENRI, even after the Duc d'Alençon's refusal, which opened up the whole question again from the very beginning, had become, if possible, even more friendly with the Prince than before.

Catherine concluded from this intimacy that the two Princes were not only on good terms, but were still plotting together. She questioned Marguerite on the subject; but Marguerite was her mother's own daughter, and the Queen of Navarre, whose chief talent lay in evading dangerous explanations, fenced with her mother's questions so successfully that, after replying to them all, she left her more puzzled than before.

The Florentine had, therefore, nothing to guide her but that instinct of intrigue which she had brought with her from Tuscany, at that time the most intriguing of the smaller States, together with that sentiment of violence which she had imbibed at the Court of France, at that time the most disunited of Courts in interests and opinions.

She realised from the first that the Béarnais derived a considerable part of his influence from his alliance with the Duc d'Alençon, and determined to detach him from it.

From the day that she conceived this determination, she began to enmesh her son with all the skill and patience of the fisher, who, when he has let the nets sink at some distance from the fish, draws them nearer imperceptibly, until the prey is surrounded on all sides.

The Duc François perceived this increase of affection, and on his side made advances towards his mother. As for Henri, he pretended to observe nothing, and watched his ally more closely than he had done before.

Each of them was waiting for an event.

Well, while each was in expectation of this event, certain for some of them, probable for others, one morning, after a red sunrise accompanied by a warm mist that gave promise of a fine day, a pale-faced man, leaning on a stick, and walking with difficulty, came out of a small house situated behind the Arsenal, and took his way along the Rue Petit-Musc.

When he came near the Porte Saint-Antoine, after going along the walk which wound like a marshy meadow round the moat of the Bastille, he passed the great rampart on his left and entered the Garden of the Arbalists, the keeper of which welcomed him with respectful salutations.

There was no one in this garden, which, as its name implies, belonged to a private Club, that of the Arbalists, or Cross-bow men. But, had any persons been walking there, they would have found the pale-faced man worthy of all their attention, for his long moustaches and his walk, which still preserved its military character, albeit rendered slow through illness, clearly denoted that here was some recently wounded officer who was testing his strength by moderate exercise, and recruiting his vigour in the sunshine.

Strange to say, however, when the cloak in which, spite of the increasing warmth of the day, this apparently inoffensive man was wrapped, fell open, it exposed to view two long pistols suspended by silver clasps from his belt, which contained, in addition, a large dagger, and supported a sword of such colossal size that it seemed quite impossible for him to draw it. This formidable weapon completing his armoury, banged with its scabbard against his emaciated and trembling legs. By way of increase to all these precautions the walker, solitary though he was, cast a scrutinising glance around him at every step he took, as though to question each winding of the path, each bush and each ditch.

In such guise did our friend enter the garden and slowly make for a little arbour looking on to the ramparts, from which it was only separated by a double boundary, consisting of a thick hedge and

a narrow ditch. Arrived there, he stretched himself on a turf seat within reach of a table upon which the keeper, who combined with his other duties that of purveyor of refreshments, presently placed a cup containing some sort of cordial drink.

The invalid had sat there for about ten minutes, occasionally raising the earthenware vessel to his lips and sipping its contents, when suddenly his face, spite of the interesting paleness which marked it, assumed a terrible expression. He had just seen, coming from the Croix-Faubin, along a path which to-day is called the Rue de Naples, a horseman wrapped in a large cloak, who stopped close to the bastion and waited.

He had been there about five minutes, and the pale-faced man, whom the reader has perhaps already recognised as Maurevel, had scarcely had time to recover from the emotion excited by his presence, when a young man, in a close-fitting jacket like a page's, arrived by the road since called the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Nicolas, and joined the cavalier.

Concealed within his leafy arbour, Maurevel could see all that passed, and could even hear without difficulty, and when you are told that the cavalier was De Mouy, and that the young man in the close-fitting jacket was Orthon, you may judge if his eyes and ears were not busy.

Both of them looked round them with the utmost caution; Maurevel held his breath. Orthon being the youngest, and therefore the most confident, was the first to break the silence.

"You can speak out, sir, nobody can either see or hear us."

"That is well," said De Mouy. "You will go to Madame de Sauve and give this note into her own hands if she is at home; if she is out, you will put it behind the mirror where the King used to put his; then you will wait in the Louvre. If a reply is given to you, you will bring it to the place you know of; if you get no reply, you will come for me this evening with a musketoon to the place which I have appointed you."

"Very well," said Orthon; "I understand."

"Now I must leave you; I have business that will occupy me all day. You needn't hurry, it is unnecessary; you don't require to reach the Louvre before he is there, and I believe he is taking a lesson in fowling this morning. Go, then,

and act boldly. You have recovered, and you are going to thank Madame de Sauve for all the kindness she has shown you during your convalescence. Go, my lad, go."

Maurevel listened to all this, his eyes staring, his hair standing on end, and his brow streaming with perspiration. His first impulse had been to draw a pistol from his belt and take aim at De Mouy; but a movement, which had thrown the latter's cloak partly open, had disclosed beneath this cloak a stout and solid cuirass. Most likely, then, the bullet would be flattened against this cuirass, or else would strike some part of the body where the wound would not be mortal. Besides, he reflected that De Mouy, vigorous and well-armed, would have the best of the bargain with himself, wounded as he was, and with a sigh he replaced the pistol which he had already pointed at the Huguenot.

"What a misfortune," he muttered, "not to be able to polish him off here with no other witness save that young rascal, for whom my second shot would serve so nicely!"

But at this moment Maurevel reflected that the note given to Orthon, to be carried to Madame de Sauve, might possibly be of more importance than even the Huguenot's life.

"Ah!" said he, "you escape me once again this morning; be it so. Go off safe and sound; but my turn will come to-morrow, even if I have to follow you to hell, whence you have come to destroy me unless I destroy you."

At this moment De Mouy drew his cloak over his face and disappeared rapidly in the direction of the marshes of the *Temple*: Orthon went back by the moats, which led him down to the banks of the river.

Thereupon Maurevel, getting up with more vigour and activity than he ventured to hope for, returned to the Rue de la Cerisaie, entered his house, ordered a horse to be saddled, and, feeble as he was, and at the risk of re-opening his wounds, galloped along the Rue Saint-Antoine, reached the Quays, and dashed into the Louvre.

Five minutes after he had disappeared through the wicket, Catherine knew all that had taken place, and Maurevel received the thousand gold crowns which had been promised him for the arrest of the King of Navarre.

"Oh!" said Catherine, then, "either I am greatly mistaken, or this De Mouy is the dark spot which René discovered in the horoscope of that cursed Béarnais."

Orthon entered the Louvre a quarter of an hour after Maurevel, showed himself boldly, as De Mouy had advised him to do, and reached the apartments of Madame de Sauve after speaking to several of the inmates of the Palace on his way.

He found no one within but Dariole, Catherine having just sent for Madame de Sauve to copy some important letters, and she had only been with the Queen for about five minutes.

"Very well, I will wait," said Orthon.

And profiting by his knowledge of the apartments, the young man went into Madame de Sauve's bedchamber, and after satisfying himself that he was alone, placed the note behind the mirror.

Just as he was withdrawing his hand, Catherine entered.

"What are you about there?" asked Catherine; "are you looking for Madame de Sauve?"

"Yes, Madame; I have not seen her for a long time, and was afraid of being thought ungrateful for being so slow in coming to thank her."

"You love this dear Charlotte very much, then?"

"With all my heart, Madame."

"And you are faithful, so I am told?"

"Your Majesty will think that quite natural when I tell you that Madame de Sauve bestowed attention on me which I did not deserve, being merely a servitor."

"And on what occasion was it that she attended to you?" asked Catherine, pretending to be ignorant of what had happened to the lad.

"When I was wounded, Madame."

"Ah! poor lad!" said Catherine, "you were wounded?"

"Yes, Madame."

"When was that?"

"The evening when they came to arrest the King of Navarre. I was so frightened when I saw the soldiers, that I shouted out and called for help; one of them gave me a blow on the head and I fell stunned."

"Poor lad! and you are quite well again?"

"Yes, Madame."

"So that you are looking for the King

of Navarre in order to enter his service again?"

"No, Madame. When the King of Navarre heard that I had dared to resist your Majesty's orders, he drove me away without mercy."

"Really!" said Catherine, in a tone full of interest. "Well, I will take charge of this matter. But if you are waiting for Madame de Sauve, you will wait in vain; she is busy down below in my room."

And Catherine, thinking that perhaps Orthon had not had time to hide the note behind the looking-glass, went into Madame de Sauve's closet, to give Orthon an opportunity of fulfilling his errand.

Just at this moment, and as Orthon, who felt uneasy at the Queen-Mother's unexpected arrival, was asking himself whether her presence did not betoken some plot against his master, he heard three gentle taps on the ceiling; this was the pre-arranged signal which he himself used to give his master in case of danger, when the King was with Madame de Sauve, and he, Orthon, was keeping guard.

These three taps made him start; some mysterious revelation seemed to enlighten him, and he thought that on this occasion the warning was intended for himself; he, therefore, ran to the looking-glass, and abstracted the note which he had already placed there.

Catherine followed all the lad's movements through an opening in the curtains; she saw him rush to the glass, but she did not know whether it was to hide the note or to remove it.

"Well!" murmured the Florentine, impatiently, "why doesn't he go now?"

And she immediately went into the bedroom with a smile on her face.

"Still here, mylad?" said she. "Why, what are you waiting for? Didn't I tell you that I would undertake to look after your fortunes? When I say a thing, do you doubt it?"

"God forbid, Madame!" answered Orthon.

And the lad, approaching the Queen, knelt down, kissed the hem of her robe, and went out hastily.

As he went out he saw in the ante-chamber the Captain of the Guard, who was waiting for Catherine. The sight did not tend to remove his suspicions, rather it redoubled them.

Catherine, on her side, no sooner saw the curtain fall behind Orthon, than she went quickly to the glass. But in vain did she thrust her impatient hand behind it; no note did she find.

And yet she was certain she had seen Orthon go to the glass. It must have been, then, for the purpose of removing it, and not of placing it there. Fate was giving her enemies a power equal to her own. A mere lad became a man the moment he began to struggle with her.

She looked, foraged about,—nothing!

"Oh! unfortunate boy!" she cried. "I intended no harm to him, and lo! by removing the note he goes to meet his fate. Here, Monsieur de Nancey, here!"

M. de Nancey ran in

"Here I am, Madame. What does your Majesty wish?"

"You have been in the ante-chamber?"

"Yes, Madame."

"You saw a lad go out?"

"This very moment."

"He can't have gone far?"

"Scarcely half-way down the stairs."

"Call him back."

"What is his name?"

"Orthon. If he refuses to come back, bring him by force. Don't frighten him, however, if he makes no resistance. I must speak to him at once."

The Captain of the Guard hurried off on his errand.

As he had foreseen, Orthon was scarcely half-way down the stairs, for he was going down slowly in the hope of meeting the King of Navarre or Madame de Sauve, either on the staircase or in one of the corridors. He heard himself called, and gave a start. His first impulse was to run; but with a power of reflection beyond his years, he realised that if he tried to escape, all was lost. Accordingly, he stopped.

"Who calls me?"

"I, M. de Nancey," answered the Captain of the Guard, hurrying down the steps.

"But I am in a great hurry," said Orthon.

"Her Majesty the Queen-Mother wants you," said M. de Nancy, as he came up to him.

The lad wiped away the perspiration trickling down his brow, and remounted the stairs.

The Captain followed behind him.

Catherine's first intention was to arrest

the youth, search him, and seize the note of which she knew he was the bearer; consequently, her idea was to charge him with theft, and she had already detached from her dress a diamond clasp, with the object of accusing him of stealing it; but she reflected that there was danger in this plan, since it would arouse the suspicions of the youth. The latter would warn his master, who would thereupon become distrustful, and being on his guard would give her no advantage over him.

Doubtless she might have had the youth lodged in some dungeon; but the report of the arrest, however secretly effected, would get about the Louvre, and a single word breathed in respect to it would put Henri on his guard.

Still, this note Catherine must have, for a note from De Mouy to the King of Navarre, in the delivery of which such pains were taken, must doubtless contain an entire conspiracy. Accordingly, she quietly replaced the diamond clasp in her dress.

"No, no," said she, "that plan is a bad one. Yet for a note . . . which perhaps, after all, is not worth the trouble," she continued, frowning, and speaking so low that she could hardly hear her own words. "But, upon my word, it is not my fault; it is his. Why didn't the little rascal put the note where he ought to have done! That note I must have."

At this moment Orthon came in again. Catherine's face must have worn an alarming expression, for the lad turned pale and stopped on the threshold. He was still too young to be perfectly master of himself.

"Madame," said he, "you have done me the honour to call me back; how can I serve your Majesty?"

Catherine's face brightened as though a ray of sunshine had illuminated it.

"I called you back, my child," said she, "because your face pleases me, and having promised to take your fortunes under my charge, I wish to keep my promise without delay. We Queens are accused of being forgetful. It is not our hearts, but our minds, taken up with business, which are forgetful. Well, I remembered that Princes hold men's fortunes in their hands, and so I called you back. Come, my child, follow me."

M. de Nancey, who took the scene seriously, watched this tender behaviour

of Catherine with no small astonishment.

"Can you ride, my little man?" asked Catherine.

"Yes, Madame."

"Come into my closet, then; I am going to give you a message to take to Saint-Germain."

"I am at your Majesty's orders."

"Have a horse got ready for him, Nancey."

M. de Nancey disappeared.

"Come, my child," said Catherine.

She walked first and Orthon followed her.

The Queen-Mother descended to the next floor, then passed along the corridor in which were the apartments of the King and the Duc d'Alençon, reached the winding staircase, descended another floor, opened a door leading to a circular gallery of which nobody, except the King and herself, possessed the key, made Orthon enter, and then entered herself, closing the door behind her. This gallery, like those of the Castle of St. Angelo, at Rome, and the Pitti Palace at Florence, was designed as a means of escape in case of danger.

Closing the door, Catherine found herself shut in with Orthon within this dark gallery. Both proceeded some twenty paces further, Catherine walking first and Orthon following.

Suddenly Catherine turned round and Orthon saw upon her face the same expression which he had observed ten minutes before. Her eyes, rounded like those of the cat or the panther, seemed to flash flames in the darkness.

"Stop!" she said.

Orthon felt a shudder run through his frame; a deathly chill, like an icy mantle, descended from the vaulted roof; the floor felt as though he were walking over a tomb; Catherine's piercing glances penetrated to his heart.

He fell back and stood trembling against the wall.

"Where is the note which you were charged to deliver to the King of Navarre?"

"The note?" stammered Orthon.

"Yes; or to put it behind the glass, if he were absent?"

"I, Madame?" said Orthon, "I don't know what you mean."

"The note which De Mouy gave you an hour ago at the back of the Garden of the Arbalists."

"I have no note," said Orthon; "your Majesty is quite mistaken."

"You lie," said Catherine. "Give me the note, and I will keep the promise I made you."

"What promise, Madame?"

"To enrich you."

"I have no note, Madame," replied the lad.

Catherine began to grind her teeth, but thought better of it, and smiled instead.

"Will you give it me," said she, "and you shall a thousand gold crowns?"

"I have no note, Madame."

"Two thousand crowns."

"It is impossible: I have not got it, so I cannot give it you."

"Ten thousand crowns, Orthon."

Orthon, who saw the tide of anger surging to the Queen's brow, thought that the only way of saving his master was to swallow the note. He put his hand to his pocket. Catherine, guessing his intention, seized his hand.

"Come, child," said she, laughing. "Good, you are a faithful lad. When Princes wish to attach a servant to themselves, there is no harm in making sure that he is trustworthy. I now know that I can rely upon you. See, here is my purse as your first reward. Go and carry the note to your master, and tell him that from to-day you are in my service. Go, you can get out without me by the door by which we came in; it opens from the inside."

And Catherine, placing her purse in the astonished lad's hands, stepped forward a few paces and laid her hand on the wall.

Orthon, however, remained standing in an attitude of hesitation. He could not believe that the danger which had threatened him had disappeared.

"Come, do not tremble so," said Catherine; "didn't I tell you that you were at liberty to go, and that if you like to return, your fortune is made?"

"Thank you, Madame," said Orthon; "you forgive me, then?"

"I do more, I reward you; you are a good carrier of notes, a pretty messenger of love; only, you forget that your master is waiting."

"Ah! true," said Orthon, hurrying toward the door.

But hardly had he taken three steps, when the floor gave way beneath his feet. He stumbled, threw out his hands,

uttered a cry of horror, and vanished headlong into the *oubliette* of the Louvre, the spring connected with which had just been pressed by Catherine.

"Now," murmured Catherine, "thanks to this young rascal's obstinacy, I shall have to go down a hundred and fifty stairs."

Catherine returned to her room, lighted a dark lantern, went back to the corridor, replaced the spring, opened the door of a winding staircase, which seemed to descend into the bowels of the earth, and, urged by the insatiable thirst of a curiosity which was but the agent of her hatred, arrived at an iron door, which opened on to the floor of the *oubliette*.

There lay the unhappy Orthon, bruised and bleeding, maimed and mangled by his fall of a hundred feet, but still breathing.

Behind the thickness of the wall could be heard the rolling waters of the Seine, from which a subterranean channel conveyed a small affluent to the bottom of the staircase.

Catherine stepped into the damp and noisome vault, which, since the day of its construction, must have witnessed many falls similar to the one we have just described; then she searched her unconscious victim and seized the note, making sure that it was really the one she desired to possess. Next, pushing the body with her foot, she placed her thumb upon a spring; the floor gave way, and the body, gliding down by its own weight, disappeared in the direction of the river.

After closing the door, she ascended the stairs again, shut herself in her closet, and read the note, which ran as follows:

"Be at the Inn of the *Belle Etoile*, in the Rue de l'Arbre Sec, this evening at ten o'clock. If you are coming, send no answer; if you are not coming, say 'No' to the bearer."

"De Mouy de Saint-Phale."

Catherine smiled as she read this note; she was thinking only of the victory which she was about to gain, completely forgetful of the terrible price with which that victory had been bought.

Besides, what was Orthon? A young and handsome lad, with a faithful and devoted heart; that was all.

That, as you may suppose, could not count for a single instant in the scale of

those stern balances in which the fate of Empires are weighed.

Having read the note, Catherine ascended immediately to Madame de Sauve's room, and placed it behind the looking-glass.

As she came down she found the Captain of the Guard at the entrance to the corridor.

"Madame," said De Nancey, "the horse is ready, in accordance with your Majesty's orders."

"My dear Baron," said Catherine, "the horse is not wanted; I have had a talk with the lad, and he really is not intelligent enough to be intrusted with my message. I took him for a lackey, but he is nothing more than a groom; so I have given him some money and sent him out by the small wicket."

"But what about your commission?" said M. de Nancey.

"My commission?" repeated Catherine.

"Yes, the message that was to be sent to Saint-Germain. Would your Majesty like me to take it, or shall I send it by one of my men?"

"No, no," said Catherine, "you and your men will have something else to do to-night."

And Catherine withdrew to her apartments, confident that she held between her two hands the fate of this accursed King of Navarre.

CHAPTER XV

THE HOSTELRY OF THE *Belle Etoile*.

TWO hours after the incident just related, no trace of which survived, not even on Catherine's features, Madame de Sauve, having finished her work with the Queen, ascended to her own apartment. Henri followed her: and having learnt from Dariole that Orthon had been there, he went straight to the glass and took the note. With its contents we are already acquainted. The note bore no address.

"Henri will not fail at the appointed place," thought Catherine, "for, even if he wished not to go, he cannot now find the bearer to say 'No' to him?"

On this point Catherine was not mistaken. Henri inquired for Orthon, and Dariole told him that he had gone out with the Queen-Mother; but, as he had found the note in its place, and knew the poor lad to be incapable of treachery, he felt no uneasiness.

He dined at the King's table as usual, where Charles twitted him unmercifully on the want of address which he had displayed that morning in fowling.

Henri excused himself on the ground that he was a mountaineer, and not a man of the plains, but promised Charles that he would study the art of fowling.

Catherine was charmingly gracious, and, on rising from table, begged Marguerite to give her her company for the rest of the evening.

At eight o'clock Henri took two gentlemen, went out with them by the Porte Saint-Honoré, made a long roundabout journey, returning by the Tour de Bois, crossed the Seine at the Nesle ferry, walked along the banks as far as the Rue Saint-Jacques, where he dismissed them as though bent on some amorous adventure. At the corner of the Rue des Mathurins, he found a man on horseback, wrapped in a cloak; he went up to him.

"Mantes," said the man.

"Pau," replied the King.

The man immediately dismounted. Henri wrapped himself in the cloak, which was all travel-stained, mounted the horse, which was all steaming, returned by the Rue de La Harpe, crossed the Pont Saint-Michel, rode through the Rue Barthélemy, crossed the river once more at the Pont aux Meuniers, went down the Quays, took the Rue de l'Arbre Sec, and finally knocked at Master La Hurière's door.

La Mole was in the room with which we are already acquainted, writing a long love-letter to you can guess whom.

Coconnas was in the kitchen with La Hurière, superintending the basting of six partridges, and arguing with his friend the Innkeeper as to the proper amount of cooking for partridges before withdrawing them from the spit.

At this moment Henri knocked. Grégoire went to open the door, and took the horse round to the stables, while the traveller entered, stamping his feet on the floor, as though to warm them.

"Hi! Master La Hurière," said La

Mole, continuing his writing, "a gentleman is asking for you."

La Hurière advanced, eyed Henri from head to foot, and as his cloak of coarse cloth did not inspire the Innkeeper with any very great respect:

"Who are you?" he asked the King.

"Why, zounds!" said Henri, pointing to La Mole, "Monsieur has just told you; I am a gentleman from Gascony who comes to Paris to present himself at Court."

"What do you require?"

"A bed and supper."

"Humph!" said La Hurière; "have you a lackey?"

This was, as we know, his usual question.

"No," replied Henri; "but I intend to have one as soon as my fortunes are made."

"I do not let any gentlemen's chambers without lackeys' chambers as well," said La Hurière.

"Not even if I offer to pay you a rose noble for supper, and arrange about your terms to-morrow?"

"Oho! you are very generous, my gentleman!" said La Hurière, looking at Henri with suspicion.

"No; but in the belief that I should spend the night at your hostelry, which was strongly recommended to me by a gentleman in my neighbourhood, I have invited a friend to sup with me here. Have you any good Arbois wine?"

"Some as good as ever the Prince de Béarn drank."

"Good! I will pay for that separately. Ah! here comes my guest."

In point of fact, the door had just opened, admitting a second gentleman, somewhat older than the first, and dragging by his side an immense rapier.

"Ah, ha!" said he, "you are punctual, my young friend. It is a great thing for a man who has just travelled two hundred leagues to arrive on the stroke of time."

"Is this your fellow-guest?" asked La Hurière.

"Yes," said the first comer, stepping up to the man with the rapier, and shaking him by the hand; "serve us with supper."

"Here, or in your room?"

"Wherever you please."

"Master," said La Mole, calling La Hurière, "pray rid us of these Huguenot-looking fellows; Coconnas and I can't discuss a word of our business before them."

"Lay the supper in Number 2, on the third floor," said La Hurière. "Go up, gentlemen, go up."

The two travellers followed Grégoire, who went before to light their way.

La Mole followed them with his eyes until they had disappeared; then, turning round, he saw Coconnas with his head thrust out of the kitchen. Two great staring eyes and an open mouth imparted to that head a singular look of blank astonishment.

La Mole approached him.

"'Sdeath! sir," said Coconnas; "did you see that?"

"What?"

"Those two gentlemen?"

"Well?"

"I could swear that it is . . ."

"Who?"

"Why . . . the King of Navarre and the man with the red cloak."

"Swear if you like, but not so loud."

"Then you recognised them too?"

"Certainly."

"What have they come here for?"

"Some love-affair."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it."

"La Mole, I prefer sword-thrusts to love-affairs of that sort. I was ready to swear a moment ago; now I will wager."

"What will you wager?"

"That some conspiracy is afoot."

"Oh! you are mad."

"And I tell you . . ."

"I tell you that, if they are plotting, that is their affair."

"Ah! true. As a matter of fact," said Coconnas, "I am no longer in the service of M. d'Alençon; so let them arrange matters as they please."

And as the partridges appeared to be sufficiently cooked to please Coconnas, the Piedmontese, who reckoned on making the chief part of his meal off them, summoned Master La Hurière to draw them from the spit.

Meanwhile, Henri and De Mouy were installed in their room.

"Well, Sire," said De Mouy, when Grégoire had laid the table; "you saw Orthon?"

"No; but I received the note which he left behind the glass. The lad took fright, apparently, for the Queen-Mother came while he was there, and he went off without waiting for me. I felt a momentary uneasiness, for Dariole told me that the

Queen-Mother talked to him for some time."

"Oh! there is no danger; the young rascal is clever; and although the Queen-Mother is an adept at her trade, she would have her work cut out with him, I warrant."

"And you, De Mouy, have you seen him since?"

"No; but I shall see him again this evening; he is to come here for me at midnight with a good musketoon; he will tell me all about it as we are going home."

"And the man who was at the corner of the Rue des Mathurins?"

"What man?"

"The man whose horse and cloak I took; are you sure of him?"

"He is one of our most devoted followers. Besides, he doesn't know your Majesty, and is unaware whom he was addressing."

"Then we can talk over our business in perfect tranquility?"

"Without doubt; besides, La Mole is on guard."

"Capital."

"Well, Sire, what does M. d'Alençon say?"

"M. d'Alençon refuses to go, De Mouy; he has explained his views on the subject clearly. The election of the Duc d'Anjou to the throne of Poland, and the King's illness, have changed all his plans."

"Then it is he who has caused the breakdown of our whole scheme?"

"Yes."

"He is betraying us, then?"

"Not just yet; but he will do so on the first opportunity."

"Coward heart and dastard spirit! Why hasn't he replied to the letters I wrote to him?"

"In order to possess proofs, and not to give any. Meanwhile, all is lost, De Mouy, is it not?"

"On the contrary, Sire, all is won. You are well aware that the entire Party, with the exception of the few attached to the Prince de Condé, was in favour of you, and only employed the Duke, with whom they had the appearance of coming to terms, as a means of safeguarding themselves. Well, since the day of the ceremony, I have united them all and attached them to your cause. A hundred men would have sufficed you to escape in company with the Duke d'Alençon; I have now raised fifteen hundred; in a

week they will be ready, drawn up on the road to Pau. It will no longer be an escape, but a retreat. Will fifteen hundred men be enough for you, Sire, and shall you consider yourself in safety with an Army?"

Henri smiled, and tapping him on the shoulder:

"You know, De Mouy," said he, "and you are the only man who does know it, that the King of Navarre is not by nature so easily frightened a person as he is thought to be."

"Zounds! yes, Sire, I know it, and I hope that ere long all France will know it as I do."

"But when one plots, one must be successful. The first condition of success is decision; and that decision may be rapid, free, and incisive, one must be convinced of success."

"Well, Sire, which are the days set apart for sport?"

"Every eight or ten days, either with hounds or hawks."

"When was the last?"

"This very day."

"Then there will be another in eight or ten days?"

"Certainly, perhaps even sooner."

"Listen; everything seems to me quite easy. The Duc d'Anjou is gone; nobody troubles their head about him. The King is daily recovering from his indisposition. The persecutions against us have almost ceased. Be on affectionate terms with the Queen-Mother and the Duc d'Alençon; keep on telling him that you can't go away without him; try to make him believe it, which is more difficult."

"Make your mind easy, he will believe it."

"Do you think he has such great confidence in you?"

"No, God forbid! but he believes all the Queen-Mother tells him."

"And Queen Marguerite is frankly on our side?"

"I have proof of it. Besides, she is ambitious, and this absent crown of Navarre is burning her brow."

"Well, then, three days before the hunt, let me know where it will take place; whether at Bondy, Saint-Germain, or Rambouillet; add that you are ready, and when you see M. de La Mole ride off in front of you, follow him, and ride hard. Once outside the forest, if the Queen-Mother wants you, she will have

to pursue you; well, her Normandy horses won't see so much as the heels, I hope, of our barbs and Spanish jennets."

"Agreed, De Mouy."

"Have you any money, Sire?"

Henri pulled the long face with which throughout his life he greeted this question.

"Not much," said he, "but I believe Margot has some."

"Well, be it yours or hers, bring as much of it as you can."

"What are you going to do meanwhile?"

"After having devoted myself pretty actively to your Majesty's concerns, as you see, you will allow me to pay a little attention to my own business."

"Do so, De Mouy, do so; but what business have you?"

"Listen, Sire. Orthon told me (he is a very intelligent lad, whom I commend to your Majesty) that yesterday, near the *Arsenal*, he met that ruffian Maurevel, who, thanks to the care of René, has recovered his health, and is basking in the sun like the ugly snake he is."

"Ah! yes, I understand," said Henri.

"Ah! you understand, good. . . . You, Sire, will one day be King, and if you have any act of vengeance to accomplish similar to mine, you will accomplish it in the capacity of King. I am a soldier, and must avenge myself as such. So when all our little business is arranged, which will allow that ruffian five or six days more in which to recover, I, too, shall make an expedition in the direction of the *Arsenal*, and will pin him to the turf with four good rapier-thrusts, after which I shall leave Paris with a more contented mind."

"Do your business, my friend, do your business," said the Béarnais. "By the bye, you are pleased with La Mole, are you not?"

"Ah! a charming fellow, Sire, who is devoted to you body and soul, a man on whom you can rely as you would on me . . . brave . . ."

"And above all, cautious; he shall follow me, therefore, to Navarre, De Mouy, and then we must see what we can do to reward him."

As Henri was uttering these words with a cunning smile, the door opened, or rather, was burst in, and the man whose praises were being sung at that very moment appeared, pale and agitated.

"Quick, Sire," he cried, "Quick! the house is surrounded."

"Surrounded!" cried Henri, starting up; "by whom?"

"By the King's Guards."

"Oho!" said De Mouy, drawing his pistols from his belt, "it seems there is going to be some fighting."

"Oh! yes," said La Mole, "a matter of pistols and fighting, no doubt! What can you do against fifty men?"

"He is right," said the King, "and if there were any means of retreat . . ."

"There is one which I have employed already, and if your Majesty will follow me . . ."

"And De Mouy?"

"M. de Mouy can follow us also, if he likes; but you must both hasten."

Steps were heard on the staircase.

"It is too late," said Henri.

"If we could only occupy their time for five minutes," cried La Mole, "I would answer for the King's safety."

"Answer for it, then, sir," said De Mouy, "I will undertake to occupy them. Go, Sire, go."

"But what will you do?"

"Don't be uneasy, Sire, but go."

And De Mouy began by concealing the King's plate, glass, and napkin, so as to make believe he was alone at the table.

"Come, sire, come," cried De Mouy, seizing the King by the arm, and dragging him to the stairs.

"De Mouy! my gallant De Mouy!" cried Henri, holding out his hand to the young man.

De Mouy kissed the King's hand, pushed him out of the room, and bolted the door on the inside.

"Yes, yes, I understand," said Henri; "he is going to let himself be taken, while we escape; but who the devil can have betrayed us?"

"Come, sir, come; they are mounting the stairs."

In point of fact, the gleam of torches began to creep along the narrow staircase, while at the bottom could be heard the clank of swords.

"Quick, Sire, quick!" said La Mole.

And guiding the King in the darkness, he made him ascend two floors, opened the door of a room and bolted it on the inside, then opening the window of a closet:

"Sire," said he, "is your Majesty afraid of excursions on roofs?"

"I?" said Henri; "a chamois hunter!"

"Follow me, then, Sire; I know the way and will act as your guide."

"Go on," said Henri, "I will follow you."

And La Mole stepped out first, and followed the course of a broad ledge forming a gutter, at the end of which he came to a hollow formed by the junction of two roofs; from this hollow ran a garret without windows, overlooking an uninhabited loft.

"Sire," said La Mole, "you are in port."

"Ah! so much the better," said Henri.

And he wiped his pale brow, on which the beads of sweat stood out.

"Now," said La Mole, "things will take care of themselves; from the loft runs a staircase into an alley leading to the street. I took the same road, Sire, on a night as terrible as this, though in a different way."

"Come, come," said Henri, "forward!"

La Mole glided first through the open window, reached the insecurely-closed door, and opened it, found himself at the top of a spiral staircase, and placing in the King's hands the cord which acted as a hand-rail:

"Come, Sire," he said.

Half-way down the stairs Henri stopped. He had arrived opposite a window which overlooked the court-yard of the *Belle-Etoile*. He could see the soldiers rushing up the staircase of the Inn, some carrying swords and others torches.

Suddenly, amid a group of soldiers, the King of Navarre perceived De Mouy. He had surrendered his sword and was walking down quietly.

"Poor fellow," said Henri; "brave and loyal heart!"

"Upon my word, Sire," said La Mole, "your Majesty will observe that he looks perfectly calm, nay, he is even laughing! He must be planning some pretty little trick, for he seldom laughs, as you know."

"And the young man who was with you?"

"M. de Coconnas?" asked La Mole.

"Yes, M. de Coconnas, what has become of him?"

"Oh! Sire, I am not in the least uneasy about him. When he saw the soldiers, all he said to me was:—

"Are we running any risk?"

"Why, yes! the risk of our heads," I answered him.

"And shall you make your escape?"

"I hope so."

"Well, so shall I," he replied. "And I swear to you, Sire, that escape he will. When they take Coconnas, it will be because it suits him to be taken, I'll warrant you."

"All is well, then," said Henri; "let us try to get back to the Louvre."

"Good Lord! Sire, nothing easier; let us wrap ourselves in our cloaks and go out. The street is filled with people who have hurried up at the noise of the disturbance, and we shall be taken for sight-seers like them."

As it turned out, Henri and La Mole found the door open, and the only difficulty they experienced in getting out was owing to the crowd that thronged the street.

However, they both succeeded in slipping along the Rue d'Averon; but on reaching the Rue des Poulies, they saw, crossing the Place de Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, De Mouy and his escort, conducted by M. de Nancey, Captain of the Guard.

"Ah!" said Henri, "they are taking him to the Louvre, it seems: the devil! the wickets will be closed . . . The names of all those who come in will be taken down; and if I am seen coming in after him, they will think it probable that I was with him."

"Well, Sire," said La Mole, "you must go in some other way than by the wicket."

"How the devil would you have me go in?"

"Cannot your Majesty use the window of the Queen of Navarre?"

"Egad! Monsieur de La Mole," said Henri, "you are right. Fancy my not thinking of it! But how to let the Queen know?"

"Oh!" said La Mole, with a respectful bow, "your Majesty can throw stones so straight!"

CHAPTER XVI

DE MOUY DE SAINT-PHALE

CATHERINE had taken her precautions so well this time that she felt sure of the result.

Consequently she had dismissed Marguerite at about ten o'clock, in the conviction—a perfectly well-founded one, moreover—that the Queen of Navarre was ignorant of the plot brewing against her husband, and had gone to the apartments of King Charles, begging him to delay his retiring to bed.

Puzzled by the air of triumph which, spite of her habitual dissimulation, brightened his mother's countenance, Charles questioned Catherine, who merely replied:

"I can tell your Majesty but this, that you will be delivered to-night from your two worst enemies."

Charles raised his eyebrows, as much as to say:—"Very well, we shall see." And whistling to his huge greyhound, who came crawling to him on his belly like a serpent and laid his sharp and intelligent-looking head on his master's knee, Charles waited.

After some minutes, which Catherine passed with both eyes and ears on the strain, a pistol-shot was heard in the courtyard.

"What is that noise!" asked Charles, with a frown, while the greyhound sprang up and cocked his ear.

"Nothing," said Catherine; "merely a signal."

"And what does the signal mean?"

"It means that from this moment, Sire, one dangerous enemy is unable to harm you."

"Has somebody been killed?" asked Charles, looking at his mother with that imperious glance which denotes that pardon and death are two inherent attributes of sovereign power.

"No, Sire; two men have been arrested, that is all."

"Oh!" muttered Charles, "nothing but hidden plots and conspiracies of which the King is ignorant. Zounds! mother, but I am old enough to take care of myself, and I refuse to be in leading-strings any longer. Go to Poland with your son Henri, if you want to reign; but you

make a mistake if you try to play that game here, I tell you."

"My son," said Catherine, "this is the last time that I will meddle in your affairs. But this was an enterprise begun some time ago, one in which you always thought I was mistaken, and my heart was set on proving to your Majesty that I was right."

At this moment several men halted in the vestibule, and the sound of their muskets rang out as they grounded them upon the flag-stones.

Almost immediately afterwards M. de Nancey sent to ask the King's permission to enter.

"Let him come in," said Charles abruptly.

M. de Nancey entered, saluted the King, and turning to Catherine:—

"Madame," said he, "your Majesty's orders have been carried out; he is taken."

"What *he*?" cried Catherine, in great agitation; "have you only taken *one* of them?"

"He was alone, Madame."

"And did he offer resistance?"

"No, he was quietly supping in a room, and surrendered his sword at the first summons."

"Of whom are you speaking?" asked the King.

"You shall see," said Catherine. "Bring in the prisoner, Monsieur de Nancey."

Five minutes later De Mouy was led in.

"De Mouy!" cried the King; "and what is this all about, sir?"

"Why, Sire," said De Mouy, with perfect calmness, "if your Majesty permits me, I will ask you the same question."

"Instead of putting that question to the King," said Catherine, "be good enough, Monsieur de Mouy, to inform my son who was the man that was in the King of Navarre's chamber on a certain night, and who, on that night, in resisting his Majesty's orders like the rebel that he is, killed two of the guards and wounded M. de Maurevel?"

"Yes, indeed," said Charles, with a frown; "do you know the name of the man, Monsieur de Mouy?"

"Yes, Sire; does your Majesty desire to hear it?"

"I should be pleased to do so, I confess."

"Well, Sire, his name is De Mouy de Saint-Phale."

"It was you?"

"Myself!"

Catherine, astounded at this audacity, drew back a step, coming nearer to the young man.

"And how came you to dare to resist the King's order?" asked Charles.

"In the first place, Sire, I was ignorant that there was an order from your Majesty; and in the next place, I saw but one thing—or, rather, one man—M. de Maurevel, the murderer of my father and of the Admiral. Then I recollected that a year and a half ago, in this very room where we now are, during the evening of the twenty-fourth of August, your Majesty had with your own lips promised me that justice should be inflicted on the murderer. Well, grave events having happened since that time, I thought that the King had been obliged involuntarily to abandon his intention. When I saw Maurevel within my grasp, I believed he was sent me by heaven. Your Majesty knows the rest. I struck at him as at an assassin, and shot those men down as bandits."

Charles made no reply; his friendship for Henri had caused him for some time past to view things in a different way to what he had done formerly, and more than once to view them with terror.

The Queen-Mother had recorded in her memory certain words uttered by her son with reference to the affair of St. Bartholomew, words which savoured of remorse.

"But," said Catherine, "for what purpose did you come to the King of Navarre's room at such an hour?"

"It is rather a long story," replied De Mouy; "but still, if your Majesty has the patience to listen . . ."

"Yes," said Charles; "go on; I should like to hear it."

"I will obey, Sire," said De Mouy, with a bow.

Catherine seated herself, looking uneasily at the young leader.

"We are listening," said Charles. "Actæon, come here."

The hound returned to the place he had occupied before the entrance of the prisoner.

"Sire," said De Mouy, "I had come to his Majesty the King of Navarre as a deputy from our brethren, your loyal subjects of the Religion."

Catherine made a sign to the King.

"Be quiet, mother," said the latter; "I am not losing a word. Continue,

Monsieur de Mouy, continue: with what object had you come?"

"To warn the King of Navarre that his abjuration had lost him the confidence of the Huguenot Party; but that, notwithstanding, through respect for the memory of his father, Antoine de Bourbon, and, above all, of his mother, the heroic Jeanne d'Albret, those of the Religion owed him this mark of respect, that they would request him to renounce his claims to the crown of Navarre."

"What is he saying?" cried Catherine, unable, spite her power of self-control, to receive this unexpected shock in silence.

"Ah!" said Charles; "but this crown of Navarre, which is transferred from one head to another in this way without my permission, belongs to some extent to me, I imagine."

"The Huguenots, Sire, recognise better than anyone this principle of suzerainty which your Majesty has just enunciated. Accordingly they hoped to induce your Majesty to settle the crown upon the head of one whom you love."

"One whom I love!" said Charles. "Deuce and all! whose head are you talking of, sir? I don't understand you."

"The head of the Duc d'Alençon."

Catherine turned deadly pale, and devoured De Mouy with a glance of flame.

"And my brother of Alençon knew this?"

"Yes, Sire."

"And accepted this crown?"

"Subject to the approval of your Majesty, to whom he referred us."

"In point of fact," said Charles, "it is a crown which will suit our brother of Alençon admirably. And that I should not have thought of it! Thanks, De Mouy, thanks! You will be welcome at the Louvre whenever any more ideas like this occur to you."

"Sire, you would have had the whole scheme laid before you some time before this, only I feared I might have fallen into disgrace with your Majesty owing to Maurevel's unfortunate affair."

"Yes, but," said Catherine, "what did Henri say to this project?"

"The King of Navarre, Madame, yielded to the wishes of his brethren, and his renunciation was drawn up."

"In that case, you are in possession of this renunciation?" cried Catherine.

"In point of fact, Madame, I happen

to have it with me, signed by himself and dated."

"At a day anterior to the affair in the Louvre?" said Catherine.

"Yes, the day before, I believe."

And De Mouy drew from his pocket a deed of renunciation in favour of the Duc d'Alençon, written and signed by Henri, and bearing the date specified.

"Upon my word, so it is," said Charles, "and all is in proper order."

"And what did Henri demand in exchange for this renunciation?"

"Nothing, Madame; he told us that the friendship of King Charles would amply compensate him for the loss of a crown."

Catherine bit her lips and twisted her beautiful hands in anger.

"This is all perfectly correct, De Mouy," added Charles.

"But if everything was arranged between you and the King of Navarre," resumed Catherine, "what was the object of your interview with him this evening?"

"My interview with the King of Navarre, Madame?" said De Mouy. "M. de Nancey, who arrested me, will testify that I was alone. Your Majesty can call him."

"Monsieur de Nancey!" said the King.

The Captain of the Guard reappeared.

"Monsieur de Nancey," said Catherine, quickly, "was M. de Mouy quite alone at the Inn of the *Belle-Etoile*?"

"Alone in the room, yes, Madame; but not in the Inn."

"Ah!" said Catherine; "who was his companion?"

"I do not know if he was M. de Mouy's companion, Madame; but I know that he escaped by a back-door after flooring two of my guards."

"And you doubtless recognised this gentleman?"

"I did not, but my guards did."

"And who was he?" asked Charles.

"The Comte Hannibal de Coconnas."

"The Comte Hannibal de Coconnas!" repeated the King, looking gloomy and thoughtful, "the man who made such havoc among the Huguenots at the St. Bartholomew?"

"M. de Coconnas, one of M. d'Alençon's gentlemen," said De Nancey.

"Very well, very well," said Charles; "you can retire, Monsieur de Nancey, and remember one thing another time."

"What is that, Sire?"

"That you are in my service and are to obey nobody but myself."

M. de Nancey retired backwards with a respectful bow. De Mouy smiled at Catherine ironically. Then a momentary silence ensued, while the Queen twisted the cords of her girdle, and Charles stroked his greyhound.

"But what was your intention, Monsieur?" continued Charles: "did you propose to use violence?"

"Against whom, Sire?"

"Why, against Henri, François, or myself."

"Sire, we possessed your brother-in-law's renunciation and your brother's acceptance; and, as I have had the honour of telling you, we were on the point of soliciting your Majesty's sanction, when this fatal affair at the Louvre occurred."

"Well, mother," said Charles, "I see no harm in all this. You were within your rights, Monsieur de Mouy, in asking for a King. Yes, Navarre may and ought to be a separate kingdom. Nay, more, this kingdom seems created expressly for the purpose of portioning my brother of Alençon, who has always been so ambitious of a crown that, when I wear mine, he cannot take his eyes from it. The only thing which could interfere with his having this kingdom was Henriot's claim to it, but since Henri renounces it voluntarily . . ."

"Voluntarily, Sire."

"It seems it is God's will. Monsieur de Mouy, you are free to return to your brethren, whom I have punished . . . harshly, perhaps; but that rests with myself and God; and tell them that, since they desire my brother of Alençon as King of Navarre, the King of France yields to their wishes. Henceforth Navarre is a Kingdom and its Sovereign is called François. I ask but for a week in order that my brother may leave Paris with the pomp and splendour befitting a King. Go, Monsieur de Mouy, go . . . Monsieur de Nancey, let M. de Mouy pass, he is free."

"Sire," said De Mouy, stepping forward, "does your Majesty permit?"

"Yes," said the King.

De Mouy knelt and kissed the King's hand.

"By-the-bye," said Charles, checking him as he was about to rise, "did you

not ask me for justice against that scoundrel De Maurevel?"

"Yes, Sire."

"I don't know where to find him so as to grant you justice, for he is in hiding; but should you come across him, inflict justice upon him yourself; I authorise you to do so, with all my heart."

"Ah! Sire," cried De Mouy, "this, indeed, completes my joy; let your Majesty rely on me; I know no more than you do where he is, but rest assured that I will find him."

Then De Mouy, after respectfully saluting Charles and Catherine, withdrew, the Guards, who had brought him in, offering no obstacle to his departure. Traversing the corridors, he quickly reached the wicket, and once outside the Palace, sprang, as it were, at a bound from the Place Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois to the *Belle-Etoile*, where he found his horse again, thanks to whose fleetness the young man was once more breathing in safety within the walls of Mantes, three hours after the scene just related.

Catherine, repressing her anger, went back to her apartments, from which she presently passed to those of Marguerite.

There she found Henri in his dressing-gown, apparently preparing to go to bed.

"Lord Satan," she muttered, "succour an unhappy Queen, to whose prayers God turns a deaf ear!"

CHAPTER XVII

TWO HEADS FOR ONE CROWN

"**B**ID M. d'Alençon come to me," Charles had said, as he dismissed his mother.

M. de Nancey, who, since the King's reprimand, was firmly resolved to obey his orders and nobody else's, hurried with the utmost alacrity from Charles's apartments to his brother's, and conveyed to the latter, without any softening of its peremptoriness, the order which he had just received.

"The Duc d'Alençon started uneasily. He had at all times felt nervous in the King's presence, and all the more so since, by his conspiracy, he had given himself good cause for fear. At the same time,

he responded to his brother's summons with studied eagerness. He found the latter standing and whistling a hunting halloo between his teeth.

Upon his entrance, the Duc d'Alençon detected in the King's glassy eyes one of those glances of hatred which he knew so well.

"Your Majesty asked for me," said he. "What does your Majesty desire with me?"

"I wish to tell you, my good brother, that, as a reward for the great friendship you bear me, I have determined to fulfil to-day the chief desire of your heart."

"My desire?"

"Yes, ask yourself what is the thing you have dreamed of for some time past without venturing to ask me for it, and that thing I am about to give you."

"Sire, I swear to you that my one desire is for the continuance of the King's good health."

"In that case you ought to be satisfied, D'Alençon; the indisposition which attacked me at the moment of the arrival of the Poles has passed away. Thanks to Henriot, I have escaped a furious boar that would have ripped me up, and my health is as good as that of any of my subjects; so without acting the part of a bad brother, you may indulge some other wish than the preservation of my health, which is excellent."

"I have no other wish, Sire."

"Yes, yes, François," replied Charles, with impatience, "you desire the crown of Navarre, for you have come to an arrangement with Henriot and De Mouy; with the former, that he should renounce that crown, with the latter, that he should procure it for yourself. Well, Henriot renounces it; De Mouy has informed me of your request, and this crown of which you are ambitious . . ."

"Well?" asked D'Alençon, in a trembling tone.

"Well, 'ods my life! it is yours."

D'Alençon turned frightfully pale; then suddenly the blood which had rushed to his heart surged back into his veins, and a red flame burnt in his cheeks; the boon offered by the King at this particular moment annoyed him greatly.

"But, Sire," he replied, vainly endeavouring to conceal his emotion, "I desired nothing, and most certainly nothing of this kind."

"That is quite possible, my brother, for you are very discreet; but others

have desired, and have asked it on your behalf."

"Sire, I swear to you that I never. . ."

"Do not swear."

"Will you banish me, Sire?"

"Do you call *that* banishment, François? Zounds! but you are hard to please. What better could you hope for?"

D'Alençon bit his lips in despair.

"Upon my word!" continued Charles, affecting to speak pleasantly, "I didn't think you were so popular, François, especially with the Huguenots; but they are clamouring for you, and I must confess I was mistaken. Besides, I could wish nothing better than to have a man of my own—my brother who loves me and is incapable of betraying me—at the head of a party which has been fighting against us for thirty years. This step will calm everything as if by magic, not to mention that every member of the family will be a king. There is only poor Henriot, who will be nothing more than my friend. But he is not ambitious, and will gladly accept that title, which is claimed by nobody else."

"Oh! Sire, you mistake; I claim that title. . . Who has a better right to it than I? Henri is but your brother by marriage; I am your brother by blood, and above all by affection. . . Sire, I entreat you, keep me at your side."

"No, no, François," answered Charles, "that would be doing you an injury."

"Why so?"

"For a thousand reasons."

"But reflect, Sire, whether you will ever find such a faithful companion as myself; I have never left your Majesty's side since my childhood."

"I am well aware of it, and sometimes I could even have wished you further away."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, nothing . . . I know very well . . . Oh! what glorious sport you will have yonder, François; how I envy you! Do you know that the mountaineers hunt bears as we do the boar here? You will be able to present us all with magnificent skins. They hunt the bear, you know, with the dagger; you wait for the animal, and excite and anger him; he charges down on the hunter, and, when he is three or four yards from him, stands up on his hind feet. That is the moment when you plunge the knife into his heart. 'Tis a dangerous sport; but you are

brave, François, and will take a real pleasure in it."

"Ah! you re-double my regret, for I shall hunt with your Majesty no more."

"Egods! so much the better," said the King; "for I don't think hunting together suits either of us."

"What does your Majesty mean by that?"

"That to hunt with me gives you such intense pleasure, and causes you so much agitation, that you, who are skill personified—you who, with the first arquebus that comes to hand, can bring down a magpie at a hundred yards—the last time we went hunting together—you, with your own weapon, with which you are quite familiar, missed a huge boar at twenty yards, and broke the leg of my best horse instead. 'Sdeath and damnation! François, a thing like that gives one food for reflection, you know."

"Oh! Sire, set it down to my agitation," said D'Alençon, turning livid.

"Ah! yes," replied Charles, "your agitation, no doubt; well! it is just because of that emotion which I value at its proper worth, that I say to you: Believe me, François, it is best for us to hunt apart, especially when one suffers from emotion of that sort. Think over it, brother, not here—I see my presence troubles you—but when you are alone; and you will agree that I have good ground for fearing lest at some future hunt a similar agitation should seize you. Nothing is more apt to make a man do rash things than this plaguey agitation, and then, you know, you might kill the rider instead of the horse, the King in mistake for his mount. Egods! a bullet aimed a trifle too high or too low—such a thing can effect a great change in the government of a country, and of this we have an example in our own family. When Montgomery killed our father, Henri II, accidentally—through agitation, perhaps—the blow carried our brother François II to the throne, and our father Henri to the vaults at Saint-Denis. Such small causes does God need to work such mighty effects!"

As Charles developed this attack, as alarming as it was unexpected, the Duke felt the perspiration break out on his forehead.

It was impossible for the King to have conveyed more clearly to his brother that he had guessed everything. Charles,

smothering his wrath beneath a veil of pleasantry, was perhaps even more terrible than if he had allowed the molten stream of hatred which was consuming his heart to expand and boil over; his vindictiveness appeared to be equal to his malice. As the one increased, so did the other, and for the first time D'Alençon experienced remorse, or rather regret, for having conceived a crime which had proved unsuccessful.

He had carried on the struggle as far as he was able, but beneath this final blow he bent his head, and Charles perceived in his eyes the dawn of that devouring flame which, in more tender natures, hollows the furrow from which tears burst forth. But D'Alençon was of those who only weep for rage.

Charles kept his vulture-like eye fixed on him, sucking in, so to speak, the successive sensations which passed through the young man's breast. And each of these sensations, thanks to the profound study which he had made of the members of his family, revealed itself to him as clearly as though the Duke's heart had been an open book. He let him stay thus for a moment, crushed, motionless, and dumb: then in a firm tone, the hatred underlying which was clearly marked:

"My brother," said he, "we have acquainted you with our resolve, and that resolve is unalterable; you will go."

D'Alençon made a movement; Charles appeared not to observe it, and continued:

"I wish Navarre to be proud of having as ruler a brother of the King of France. Well, power, honours, everything that befits your rank you shall have, as your brother Henri has had, and like him"—he added with a smile—"you shall bless me from a distance. But never mind, distance does not affect benediction."

"Sire . . ."

"Accept, or rather be resigned. Once you are King, we will find you a wife worthy of a Son of France. Who knows! one who will bring you another throne perhaps."

"But," said the Duc d'Alençon, "your Majesty is forgetting your good friend Henri."

"Henri! But I have told you he does not seek the throne of Navarre! I have told you that he surrenders it to you! Henri is a merry fellow, and not a kill-joy like you. He likes to laugh and enjoy himself, and not to grow dry and

withered, as we who wear crowns are condemned to do."

D'Alençon uttered a sigh. "Then your Majesty wishes me to busy myself . . ."

"No, no. Don't worry yourself about anything, François; I will arrange it all myself; rely on me as a kind brother. And now that all is settled, you may go; mention our interview to your friends or not, as you please: I will take steps to let the matter become public presently. Go, François."

There was no answer to be made; the Duke bowed, and withdrew with rage in his heart.

He burned to find Henri and talk over all that had occurred; but he could only find Catherine. In point of fact, Henri was avoiding an interview, and the Queen-Mother was anxious for one.

The Duke, on seeing Catherine, immediately stifled his grief and tried to smile. Less fortunate than Henri d'Anjou, he did not seek in Catherine a mother, but merely an ally. He began therefore by dissimulating with her, since, for the formation of good alliances, a mutual deception is necessary.

Accordingly, he accosted Catherine with a face on which there lingered only a slight trace of uneasiness.

"Well, Madame," said he, "here is great news; have you heard it?"

"I hear they talk of making you a King, Monsieur."

"It is great kindness on my brother's part, Madame."

"Is it not?"

"And I am almost tempted to believe that part of my gratitude is due to you, if it was you who advised him to make me the present of a throne; albeit I confess it troubles me that I should thus rob the King of Navarre."

"You seem to love Henriot very much, my son?"

"Why, yes; we have been intimately connected for some time"

"Do you think he loves you equally?"

"I hope so, Madame."

"Such a friendship, do you know, is very edifying, especially between Princes. Court friendships are reckoned rather insecure, my dear François."

"Mother, you may take it we are not merely friends, but almost brothers."

Catherine smiled a curious smile.

"Good!" said she, "does brotherhood exist between Kings?"

"Oh! as to that, we were neither of us kings when our friendship began; we had not even the prospect of becoming kings, and that is why we grew fond of one another."

"Yes, but circumstances have now greatly changed."

"Changed, how?"

"Yes, undoubtedly; who now says but that you will *both* be Kings?"

From the nervous start which the Duke gave, and the colour which mounted to his brow, Catherine saw that the bolt she had launched had hit the mark.

"He?" said he, "Henriot King? and of what kingdom, mother?"

"Of one of the most splendid in Christendom, my son."

"What are you saying, mother?" said D'Alençon, turning pale.

"What a good mother ought to say to her son, and what you have thought of more than once, François."

"I?" said the Duke, "I have thought of nothing, Madame, I swear it."

"I am inclined to believe you; for your friend Henri—your brother, as you call him—is, for all his apparent frankness, a very clever and cunning gentleman, who keeps his secrets better than you keep yours, François. For instance, did he ever tell you that De Mouy was his confidential agent?"

Catherine, as she put this question, glanced sharply at François. The latter, however, possessed one virtue, or rather vice, namely, the power of dissimulation; he, therefore, bore the glance without flinching.

"De Mouy!" said he, in a tone of surprise, and as though the name had been mentioned to him for the first time in this connection.

"Yes, the Huguenot De Mouy de Saint-Phale, the same man who almost killed M. de Maurevel, and who, scouring France and the capital clandestinely in different disguises, is intriguing and raising an army to support your brother, Henri, against your family."

Catherine, who was unaware that on this point her son, François, knew as much as, and even more than, she did, rose with these words, preparing to make a dignified exit.

François detained her.

"One word more, mother, if you please," said he. "Since you deign to initiate me into your political affairs, tell me how

could Henri, with his slender resources and reputation, succeed in carrying on a war of sufficient importance to trouble my family?"

"My child," said the Queen, with a smile, "let me tell you he is supported by perhaps more than thirty thousand men; that on the day when he gives the word, these thirty thousand men will appear as suddenly as though they sprang out of the earth; and reflect that these thirty thousand men are Huguenots, that is to say, the bravest soldiers in the world. And, further, he has a protector whom you have not known how, or have not wished, to conciliate."

"Who is that?"

"He has the King, the King who loves him, and is backing him up; the King who, from jealousy of your brother of Poland and spite against yourself, is looking round him for a successor. Only, blind that you are not to see it, he is looking in another direction to that of his own family."

"The King! . . . you think so, mother?"

"Haven't you observed that he is fond of Henriot, his Henriot?"

"Yes, mother, yes."

"And that this fondness is reciprocated? For this same Henriot, forgetting that his brother-in-law wanted to shoot him on St. Bartholomew's Day, fawns upon him like a dog that licks the hand by which it has been struck."

"Yes, yes," murmured François, "I have already noticed it; Henri is very humble towards my brother Charles."

"Careful to humour him in everything."

"So much so that, annoyed at being always twitted by the King with his ignorance of falconry, he wants to begin to . . . so much so that he asked me yesterday — no later — if I hadn't any good books which treat of the art."

"Wait," said Catherine, whose eyes shone as though a sudden idea had crossed her mind; "wait a moment . . . and what did you reply?"

"That I would look in my library."

"Good," said Catherine, "good, he must have this book."

"But I have looked, Madame, and can find nothing."

"I will find one . . . and you shall give him the book as though it came from you."

"And what will be the consequence?"

"Have you confidence in me, D'Alençon?"

"Yes, mother."

"Will you obey me blindly with regard to Henri, whom you do not love, though you say you do?"

D'Alençon smiled.

"And whom I detest," continued Catherine.

"Yes, I will obey."

"Come here the day after to-morrow for the book; you will take it to Henri . . . and . . ."

"And . . .?"

"Leave God, Providence, or chance to do the rest."

François was well enough acquainted with his mother to know that she did not generally entrust God, Providence, or chance with the task of carrying out her designs, friendly or otherwise; but he forbore to add a single word, and bowing as one who accepts the commission with which he is charged, retired to his room.

"What does she mean?" thought the young man, as he mounted the stairs; "I haven't an idea. But of this only I am certain, that she is acting against a common enemy. Let her act, then."

Meanwhile, Marguerite, through the medium of La Mole, had received a letter from De Mouy. As she and her illustrious husband had no secrets from each other in political matters, she broke the seal and read it.

Doubtless this letter seemed interesting, for Marguerite, taking advantage of the darkness which was beginning to steal along the walls of the Louvre, slipped immediately through the secret passage, mounted the spiral staircase, and, after looking cautiously in all directions, darted swiftly as a shadow, and disappeared into the King of Navarre's ante-chamber.

This ante-chamber, since the disappearance of Orthon, was left unguarded.

His disappearance, of which we have not spoken since the moment when the reader saw its consummation in a fashion so tragic for poor Orthon, had caused Henri great uneasiness. He had unbosomed himself about it to Madame de Sauve and to his wife, but neither of them knew more about it than himself; Madame de Sauve, however, had given him certain information which had made it perfectly clear to his mind that the poor

lad had been the victim of some machination on the part of Catherine, and also that it was in consequence of this machination that he himself had almost been arrested, together with De Mouy, at the *Belle-Etoile*.

Any other than Henri would have kept silence, for he would not have dared to speak; but Henri took everything into calculation. He perceived that his silence would betray him; as a usual thing, one does not lose a confidential servant in this way without asking questions and instituting investigations. Henri did so, accordingly, in the presence of the King and of Catherine herself; he inquired about Orthon from everybody, from the sentry on duty at the wicket of the Louvre to the Captain of the Guard stationed in the King's ante-chamber, but all without result; and Henri appeared so evidently affected by this occurrence, and so attached to his missing servant, that he declared he would not replace him until he had gained the certainty that Orthon had disappeared for good and all.

The ante-chamber, then, as we have said, was empty when Marguerite entered it.

Light as was her step, Henri heard it, and turned round.

"You, Madame?" cried he.

"Yes," answered Marguerite; "read this quickly."

And she handed him the open letter.

It contained these few lines:

"Sire, the moment has arrived for putting our project of escape into execution. The day after to-morrow there will be a fowling-party along the Seine, from Saint-Germain to Maisons—that is to say, through the entire length of the forest.

"Go to this chase, although it be a hawking-party; bear a good coat of mail beneath your doublet; buckle on your best sword; ride the fastest horse in your stables.

"Towards midday—that is to say, when the chase is hottest, and the King has gone in pursuit of his falcon—slip away alone, if you are coming alone; with the Queen of Navarre, if she intends to follow you.

"Fifty of our men will be concealed in the pavilion of François I, the key of which is in our possession; nobody will know they are there, for they will come at night, and the shutters will be closed.

"You will ride down the *Allée des Violettes*, at the end of which I shall be

watching ; to the right of this, in a small glade, you will see MM. de La Mole and Coconnas with two led horses. These horses are intended to replace your own and the Queen's, should they be foundered.

"Adieu, Sire; be ready; we shall not fail."

"You will be ready," said Marguerite, repeating, after sixteen hundred years, the very words uttered by Cæsar when on the banks of the Rubicon.

"Be it so, Madame," replied Henri; "it is not I who will give you the lie."

"Come, Sire, be a hero; the matter is not difficult; you have but to follow your road, and win me a splendid throne," said the daughter of Henri II.

An imperceptible smile hovered on the lips of the Béarnais. He kissed Marguerite's hand and went out by himself to see that the coast was clear, humming the while the refrain of an old ballad:

He who best battered down the wall
Entered not the castle hall.

His precaution was not unnecessary: as he crossed the threshold of his bed-chamber, the Duc d'Alençon opened the door of the ante-chamber; the King gave Marguerite a signal with his hand, then said aloud:

"Ah! brother, it is you. Welcome."

At her husband's signal, Marguerite had realised the whole situation, and had darted into a closet, in front of which hung a large curtain.

The Duc d'Alençon entered with timid steps, and looking round in every direction.

"Are we alone, brother?" he asked in a half-whisper.

"Quite alone. What has happened? You seem quite upset."

"We are discovered, Henri."

"How discovered?"

"Yes, De Mouy has been arrested."

"I know he has."

"Well, De Mouy has told the King everything."

"What has he said?"

"That I want the throne of Navarre, and am plotting to obtain it."

"Ah! the villain!" said Henri, "and now you find yourself compromised, my poor brother. How is it, then, that you have not been arrested?"

"I don't know myself, how that is; the King made fun of me by pretending to offer

me the throne of Navarre. He hoped, no doubt, to draw from me a confession, but I said nothing."

"And, by God! you did well," said the Béarnais; "let us keep firm, both our lives depend on it."

"Yes," replied François, "the situation is a difficult one; that is why I came to ask your advice. What think you I ought to do; fly, or remain here?"

"You have seen the King, since it was to you that he spoke?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, you must have been able to read his thoughts. Follow your own inspiration."

"I should prefer to stay," answered François.

Master of himself as he was, Henri allowed a movement of delight to escape him; almost imperceptible as this movement was, it did not elude the Duke's notice.

"Stay, then," said Henri.

"But you?"

"By'r Lady!" replied Henri, "if you remain, I have no motive for going. My only object in going was to follow you in order to prove my devotion, and not forsake a brother whom I love."

"All our scheme is at an end then," said D'Alençon; "you give up without a struggle at the first suggestion of bad fortune?"

"I don't regard it as bad fortune to remain here," said Henri; "thanks to my happy-go-lucky disposition, I am contented wherever I am."

"Well, be it so," said D'Alençon, "we will drop the subject; only, should you come to any fresh decision, acquaint me with it."

"'Od's life! I'll not fail to, you may be sure," replied Henri. "Did we not agree to have no secrets from each other?"

D'Alençon persisted no further, and withdrew in a thoughtful frame of mind, for he fancied that, at a certain point in this interview, he had seen the curtain of the closet move.

In point of fact, hardly had D'Alençon retired, when this curtain was drawn aside, and Marguerite reappeared.

"What think you of this visit?" asked Henri.

"That there is something fresh and of importance."

"And what do you think it is?"

"I don't know yet; but I will find out."

"Meanwhile?"

"Meanwhile, don't fail to come to me to-morrow evening."

"I will take care not to fail, Madame," said Henri, kissing his wife's hand gallantly.

And with the same caution with which she had left her apartments, Marguerite returned thither.

CHAPTER XVIII

A BOOK ON VENERY.

SIX and thirty hours had elapsed since the events just related. Day was beginning to dawn, but the entire Louvre, as was usual on hunting-days, was already astir when the Duc d'Alençon repaired to the Queen-Mother in accordance with the invitation he had received. The latter was not in her bedchamber, but had left orders that the Duke, if he came, should be asked to wait for her. After a short interval she emerged from a secret closet, which no one was allowed to enter, and to which she was in the habit of retiring to conduct her chemical experiments.

Either through the half-closed door, or clinging to her clothing, there entered, together with Catherine, the penetrating odour of some acrid substance, and through the door-way D'Alençon noticed a thick vapour, such as is produced by the burning of an aromatic, floating in white clouds within the laboratory.

The Duke could not repress a glance of curiosity.

"Yes," said Catherine, "I have been burning some old parchments, and they gave out such a fearful smell that I threw some juniper into the stove; hence this odour." D'Alençon only bowed.

"Well!" said Catherine, concealing within the large sleeves of her dressing-gown her hands, which were stained in places with a reddish yellow; "what news since yesterday?"

"None, mother."

"Have you seen Henri?"

"Yes."

"Does he still refuse to go?"

"Absolutely."

"The knave!"

"What do you say, Madame?"

"I say that he is going."

"You think so?"

"I am certain of it."

"Then he will escape us?"

"Yes," said Catherine.

"And shall you let him go?"

"Not only shall I let him go; but I tell you further, he *must* go."

"I don't follow you, mother."

"Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you, François. A very clever physician, the same man who gave me the book on venery which you are going to take to him, has assured me that the King of Navarre is about to be attacked by a consumptive malady, one of those unrelenting diseases for which science can furnish no remedy. Now, you understand that if he is to die by so cruel a disease, it is better that he should die at a distance from us, and not at the Court under our very eyes."

"In point of fact," said the Duke, "it would cause us a great deal of trouble."

"Especially to your brother Charles," said Catherine; "while, on the other hand, if Henri should die after having disobeyed him, the King will regard his death as a punishment sent from heaven."

"You are right, mother," said François with admiration "he must go. But are you sure he will do so?"

"All his preparations are made. The place of meeting is in the Forest of Saint-Germain. Fifty Huguenots are to escort him to Fontainebleau, where five hundred more await him."

"And," said D'Alençon, with a slight hesitation and visible pallor, "does my sister Margot go with him?"

"Yes, that is arranged," said Catherine. "But, on the death of Henri, Margot will return to Court, a widow, and free."

"And are you sure Henri will die, Madame?"

"So at least the physician who gave me the book has assured me."

"And where is this book, Madame?"

Catherine went back slowly to the mysterious closet, and returned in a moment with the book in her hand.

"Here it is," she said.

D'Alençon looked at it with a certain terror.

"What is this book, Madame?" asked the Duke, with a shudder.

"I have told you already, my son; it is

a work on the art of rearing and training falcons and tiercelets, written by a very learned man for Castruccio Castracani, Tyrant of Lucca."

"And what am I to do with it?"

"Why, take it to your good friend Henriot, who asked you for it, so you told me, that or some other similar work, in order to instruct himself in the art of fowling. As he is going a-fowling with the King to-day, he is sure to read a few pages, so as to prove to the King that he is following his advice, and taking lessons. The whole point is to give it into his own hands."

"Oh! I dare not," said D'Alençon with a shudder.

"Why not?" said Catherine; "it is merely a book like another, except that it has been closed so long that the pages have stuck together. So *you* must not try to read it, François, for you can only do so by wetting your finger and turning the leaves one by one, which takes a long time, and gives a good deal of trouble."

"So that it is only a man who has a great desire for instruction who can take this time and trouble?" said D'Alençon.

"Exactly, my son; you understand."

"Ah!" said D'Alençon, "there is Henriot in the courtyard already; give it me, Madame, give it me. I will take advantage of his absence to carry the book to his room, and he will find it on his return."

"I should prefer you to give it to himself, François, it would be more safe."

"I have already told you that I dare not, Madame," replied the Duke.

"Well, go then; but at least put it in a very obvious place."

"Open? . . . Is there any objection to its being open?"

"No."

"Give it me, then."

D'Alençon, with a trembling hand, took the book, which Catherine extended to him with a firm hand.

"Take it," said Catherine, "there is no danger, since I am touching it, as you see; besides, you have your gloves."

This precaution did not satisfy the Duke, who wrapped the book in his cloak.

"Make haste," said Catherine, "Henri may come up again at any moment."

"You are right, Madame, I am going."

And the Duke went out, staggering under his emotion.

We have already introduced the reader

several times to the apartment of the King of Navarre, where he has been a witness of the incidents which took place, incidents joyful or tragic, according as the protecting Genius of the future King of France smiled or was menacing.

But never, perhaps, had these walls, stained with blood by murder, splashed with wine at revels, embalmed with perfumes by love—never, in short, had this corner of the Louvre witnessed the sight of a face so pale as was the Duc d'Alençon's, when, with the book in his hand, he opened the door of the King of Navarre's bedchamber.

And yet, as the Duke expected, there was nobody in this room to investigate with inquisitive or uneasy eyes the act he was about to commit. The first rays of dawn lighted up a room which was quite empty of human inhabitant.

The sword which M. de Mouy had recommended Henri to carry, hung ready on the wall. Some links of a coat-of-mail lay scattered on the floor. A well-filled purse and a small dagger reposed on a table, and some charred fragments of paper on the hearth, in addition to other tokens, clearly indicated to D'Alençon that the King of Navarre had assumed a coat of mail, had asked his treasurer for money, and burned all compromising documents.

"My mother was right," said D'Alençon; "the knave has betrayed me."

Doubtless this conviction gave the young man fresh purpose, for after examining every corner of the chamber, after lifting the curtains and peeping behind them, after satisfying himself from the noise in the courtyard and the stillness which reigned in the apartments that no one was thinking of watching him, he drew the book from beneath his cloak, placed it quickly on the table where the purse was lying, resting it against a desk of carved oak; then, drawing hastily back, he extended his arm, and, with a hesitation which betrayed his fear, opened the book with his gloved hand at a page containing an engraving of the chase.

D'Alençon now stepped back, and, drawing off his glove, threw it into the stove in which the letters had just been destroyed. The pliant leather crackled on the coals, twisted up, and spread out like the body of a great reptile; presently nothing was left but some black and charred remains.

D'Alençon waited until the flames had entirely consumed the glove; then he rolled up the cloak, put it beneath his arm, and returned quickly to his room. As he entered it, his heart still beating rapidly, he heard steps on the spiral staircase, and, not doubting for a moment but that Henri was returning, hastily closed the door.

Next he rushed to the window; but the window commanded only a portion of the courtyard of the Louvre. Henri was not in this portion, and this confirmed his conviction that it was he who had just come in.

The Duke sat down, and, opening a book, tried to read. The book was a History of France from Pharamond to Henri III., for which the latter, a few days after his coming to the throne, had given his *imprimatur*.

But the Duke's mind was not in his book; the fever of expectation burned in his veins. The beating of his temples smote upon his brain; he seemed to see, as one sees in a dream or magnetic trance, right through the intervening walls and into Henri's chamber.

To shut out the terrible sight which his fancy pictured to him, the Duke tried to fix his mind on something else than that terrible book lying on the oaken desk with the engraving displayed; but in vain did he take up, one after another, his weapons and his jewels, in vain did he walk up and down a hundred times on the same plank in the flooring; each detail of that engraving, of which, however, he had caught but a glimpse, remained imprinted on his mind. It represented a nobleman on horseback, who, fulfilling himself the duties of the falconer, was launching the lure, while he recalled the falcon, galloping meantime at full speed through a marshy swamp. Try as he would to forget it, the remembrance of this picture overmastered his will.

Next, it was not only the book that he saw, but the King of Navarre approaching the book, looking at the engraving, trying to turn the pages, and overcoming the difficulty he found in separating them by wetting his thumb and so forcing them apart.

And at this sight, albeit only the fantastic creation of his mind, D'Alençon staggered and was obliged to lean with one hand against a table, while with the other he covered his eyes, as though by

so doing he could shut out the spectacle he desired to avoid. Yet the spectacle was merely the figment of his own imagination.

Suddenly D'Alençon saw Henri crossing the courtyard; the latter stopped for a few moments to speak to some men who were loading two mules with what was ostensibly hawking tackle, but was in reality money and travelling baggage; then, having given his orders, he crossed the courtyard diagonally, evidently making for the entrance-gate.

D'Alençon remained glued to the spot. Then it was *not* Henri who had come up by the secret staircase, and all the anguish which he had experienced during the last quarter of an hour had been suffered in vain. That which he thought finished, or almost so, had yet to begin.

D'Alençon opened the door of his chamber and listened. This time he could not be mistaken; it was really Henri. The Duke recognised his step, and even the peculiar jingle of the rowels of his spurs.

The door of Henri's room opened and closed again. Then D'Alençon went back to his own apartments and sank into a chair.

"Good!" said he to himself; "this is what is now happening—he has crossed the ante-chamber and the outer room, and then has reached his bedchamber: arrived there, he will look for his sword, next his purse and dagger, and lastly he will find the book lying open on his table. 'What book is this?' he will ask himself; 'who can have brought it here?'"

"Then he will go up to it, will see the picture representing a cavalier recalling his falcon; then he will want to read it, and will try to turn over the leaves." A cold sweat broke out upon the Duke's brow.

"Will he call out?" said he. "Is it a poison immediate in its effect? No, no, of course not, for my mother told me that he would die slowly of a slow consumption." This thought somewhat reassured him.

Ten minutes passed thus, which seemed to him like a century of agony, at each moment of which his imagination conjured up some fresh horror. At last, unable to bear the situation any longer, he rose, and crossed his ante-chamber, which his gentlemen were beginning to fill.

"Good morning, gentlemen," said he, "I am going down to the King."

And, partly to beguile his consuming uneasiness, partly, perhaps, with the ulterior view of being able to establish an *alibi*, D'Alençon did, in fact, go down to his brother. Why did he do so? He knew not. . . . What had he to say to Charles? . . . Nothing. He was not so much seeking Charles as avoiding Henri.

Descending the small spiral staircase, he found the King's door ajar. The guards offered no obstacle to his entrance; on hunting-days neither etiquette was observed nor countersign demanded.

François went through the ante-chamber, the salon, and the bedroom successively, without meeting anyone; at last it occurred to him that Charles was no doubt in his Armoury, and on opening the door of this latter apartment, he discovered the King with his back towards him, sitting before a table in a high-backed chair, and apparently engrossed in some deeply interesting occupation. The Duke approached on tip-toe; Charles was reading.

"By the Lord!" he suddenly cried, "this is a splendid book. I have often heard it mentioned, but I didn't believe a copy of it existed in France."

D'Alençon leaned forward and advanced a step further.

"Curse the leaves," said the King, wetting his thumb in his mouth, and pressing on the page to separate it from the one that followed; "one would think they had been glued together to conceal from the eye of man the wonders they contain."

D'Alençon sprang forward.

The book over which Charles was bending was the same that he had left in Henri's room.

A muffled groan escaped his lips.

"Ah! D'Alençon, is it you?" said Charles; "you are welcome; I want you to look at the finest book on venery that ever issued from the pen of man."

The Duke's first impulse was to snatch the book from his brother's hands; but a diabolical idea kept him where he was, a ghastly smile crossed his pale lips, and he passed his hand across his eyes like a man dazzled.

Then, gradually recovering himself, but without stepping either backwards or forwards:

"Sire," he asked, "how did that book come into your Majesty's hands?"

"Nothing simpler; I went up to Henri this morning to see if he was ready, and found he had already gone out, probably to visit the stables and the kennels; but in his place I discovered this treasure, which I brought down here to read in comfort."

And the King once again wetted his thumb and turned an obstinate page.

"Sire," stammered D'Alençon, who felt his hair stand on end, and his whole frame seized with agony, "Sire, I came to tell you . . ."

"Let me finish this chapter, François," said Charles, "and then you can tell me anything you like. That makes fifty pages I have read, or rather devoured."

"He has tasted the poison five and twenty times," thought François. "My brother is as good as dead."

Whereupon he thought that there was perhaps a God in heaven, other than blind chance.

François, with trembling hand, wiped the cold beads of perspiration from his brow and waited in silence, as his brother had bidden him, until the chapter should be finished.

CHAPTER XIX

THE HAWKING PARTY

CHARLES continued to read. He devoured the pages with eager curiosity; and each of the leaves, as we have said, whether owing to the damp to which they had been so long exposed, or to some other cause, stuck to the leaf that followed. D'Alençon, with haggard eyes, watched this terrible sight, the consequences of which he alone foresaw.

"Oh! what is going to happen?" he muttered. "What! I am going into banishment in search of an imaginary throne, while Henri, at the first news of the King's illness, will return to some fortified town within twenty leagues of the capital, watching the prey which chance hands over to us, and will be able at one stride to enter Paris. The result will be that, almost before the King of Poland has heard of my brother's death,

the dynasty will be already changed. It is impossible, incredible!"

Such were the thoughts which had prompted that first involuntary feeling of horror which urged François to snatch the book from Charles. It was the persistent destiny which seemed to protect Henri while it pursued the House of Valois, against which the Duke was going to make one more struggle.

In an instant his whole plan in regard to Henri had changed. It was Charles and not Henri who had read the poisoned book; Henri was to have gone, but to have gone as a man under sentence of death. But now that fate had once more saved his life, Henri must remain; for Henri was less formidable as a prisoner at Vincennes or the Bastille, than as King of Navarre at the head of thirty thousand men.

Accordingly, the Duc d'Alençon allowed Charles to finish his chapter; and when the King raised his head from the book, he quietly observed:

"I have waited, my brother, since your Majesty bade me do so, but with great regret, because I have something to say to you of the utmost importance."

"Oh! go to the devil!" cried Charles, whose pale cheeks were gradually becoming tinged with purple, either from the excitement of reading or because the poison was beginning to act; "go to the devil! if you have come to open that subject again, you shall go off as the King of Poland has done. I have got rid of *him*, and I will get rid of *you*; so not another word."

"I have not come to talk about my own departure," said François, "but about that of someone else. Your Majesty has touched my deepest and most tender sentiment, namely, my devotion to you as my brother, my loyalty as a subject, and I wish to prove to you that *I* at least am no traitor."

"Come," said Charles, placing his elbow on the book, crossing his legs, and looking at D'Alençon with the air of a man resigning himself to be more than ordinarily patient; "come, some fresh morning report, some new mare's nest of your discovery?"

"No, Sire, a certainty, a plot which my absurd delicacy alone has prevented me from revealing to you."

"A plot?" said Charles; "let us hear about it."

"Sire," said François, "while your Majesty is fowling by the river and on the plain of Vesinet, the King of Navarre will make for the Forest of Saint-Germain, where a troop of friends is awaiting him, and he means to escape with them."

"Ha! I thought as much," said Charles. "Another slander against my poor Henri-riot! Come, will you leave him alone?"

"Your Majesty, at any rate, will not have to wait long to assure yourself whether what I have the honour to tell you is a slander or no."

"How so?"

"Because by this evening our brother-in-law will be gone."

Charles rose.

"Listen," said he, "for this once I am willing to pretend to believe your accusations; but I warn you, you and your mother, it is for the last time."

Then, raising his voice:

"Call the King of Navarre!" he added.

One of the guards started to obey the order; but François detained him by a gesture.

"That is a bad plan, brother," said he; "if you act thus, you will learn nothing. Henri will deny the charge, he will give a signal, his accomplices will be warned and will make off; then my mother and I will be accused not only of being visionaries, but slanderers to boot."

"What, then, do you ask?"

"That in the name of our brotherhood, your Majesty should listen to me; that in the name of my devotion, of which you will presently be assured, you should not act hastily. Act in such a way, Sire, that the true culprit, the man who ~~for~~ two years past has betrayed your Majesty in intention, while waiting for an opportunity to betray you in fact, should at last be recognised as guilty by infallible proofs and be punished as he deserves."

Charles made no reply; he went to a window and flung it open; the blood was surging to his brain. At last, turning round abruptly:—

"Well," said he, "what would you do? Speak, François."

"Sire," said D'Alençon, "I should surround the Forest of Saint-Germain with three detachments of Light Horse, who, at a given hour, say eleven o'clock, should advance and drive all whom they find in the Forest towards the Pavilion of François I., which I should fix upon, as though by accident, as the meeting-place

for dinner. Then, pretending meanwhile to be pursuing my falcon, when I saw Henri disappear, I should ride to the pavilion, where he will find himself trapped, together with his accomplices."

"The idea is a good one," said the King; "summon my Captain of the Guard."

D'Alençon drew from his doublet a silver whistle, suspended from a gold chain, and blew it.

Charles went to the officer and gave his orders in a low tone.

Meanwhile, his great hound, Actæon, had seized some object which he was rolling on the floor and tearing with his teeth, bounding frantically with delight.

Charles turned round and uttered a terrible oath. The prey which Actæon had seized was the precious volume on fowling, of which, as we have said, there were but three copies in the world.

The crime was equalled by its punishment. Charles seized a whip and lashed the hound with its knotted thong. Actæon gave a howl and disappeared beneath a table covered with a large cloth, which served him as a shelter.

The King picked up the book and saw, with delight, that only one page was missing, and even this was not a page of the text, but only an engraving.

He placed the book carefully upon a shelf where Actæon could not reach it. D'Alençon watched him with uneasiness. Now that the book had done its terrible work, he would have been glad to see it out of the King's hands.

Six o'clock struck. This was the hour at which the King was to descend to the courtyard, thronged with horses richly caparisoned, and men and women gaily clad. The fowlers held on their wrists their hooded falcons; some pricklers carried horns slung on scarves, in case the King, becoming tired of fowling, as he sometimes did, should wish to run a stag or roe-buck.

The King descended, closing the door of the Armoury. D'Alençon eagerly followed his every movement, and saw him put the key in his pocket. As he came down the stairs the King stopped, and put his hand to his forehead. The Duke's legs trembled no less than those of the King.

"I think there is going to be a storm," he stammered.

"A storm in January?" said Charles,

"you must be mad! No, I feel giddy, and my skin is parched: I am weak, that is all."

Then, *sotto voce*:

"They will kill me," he continued, "with their hatred and their plots."

But on setting foot in the courtyard, the fresh morning air, the shouts of the huntsmen, and the loud greetings of the assembled throng, produced on Charles their usual effect. He breathed freely and joyously. His first glance had been directed towards Henri. Henri was close to Marguerite. The excellent pair seemed so fond of each other that they could not bear to be separated.

On seeing Charles, Henri spurred his horse, and with three curvets was at his brother-in-law's side.

"Ah!" said Charles, "you are mounted as if for stag-hunting, Henriot. But, you know, we are going fowling to-day."

Then, without waiting for his reply:

"Let us start, gentlemen, let us start. We must begin our sport by nine o'clock," said the King with a frown, and in a somewhat threatening tone.

Catherine was watching the scene from a window. Her pale face, closely veiled, peeped from behind a curtain which concealed the rest of her body clothed in black.

At the order given by Charles, all this gilded, embroidered, and perfumed assemblage, headed by the King, began to defile through the gates of the Louvre, and rolled like an avalanche along the road to Saint-Germain, amid the shouts of the populace, who greeted the young monarch, as he sat, care-worn and pensive, on his snow-white steed.

"What did he say to you?" asked Marguerite of Henri.

"He congratulated me on the fineness of my horse."

"Was that all?"

"That was all."

"Then he has discovered something."

"I fear so."

"We must be cautious."

Henri's face brightened with one of those smiles habitual with him, and which were intended to convey the meaning, to Marguerite especially: "Set your mind at rest, my sweet."

As for Catherine, no sooner had the procession left the courtyard than she let fall the curtain. One thing, however she had

not failed to observe, namely, the paleness of Henri, his nervous agitation, and his half-whispered conversation with Marguerite.

Henri was pale because, not possessing much sanguine courage, his blood, whenever circumstances placed his life in jeopardy, instead of mounting to his head, as usually happens, ebbed to his heart.

He was nervously agitated, because the fashion in which Charles had greeted him, so different from the way in which he usually welcomed him, had impressed him forcibly.

Lastly, he had conversed with Marguerite, because, as we know, the husband and wife had concluded an offensive and defensive alliance in regard to matters of policy.

But Catherine had interpreted these signs quite differently.

"This time," she murmured, with her crafty smile, "I think we have caught the dear Henriot."

Then, in order to assure herself of the fact, after waiting a quarter of an hour to allow time for all concerned in the sport to leave Paris, she quitted her apartment, went along the corridor, mounted the little spiral staircase, and with the aid of her master-key opened the room of the King of Navarre.

But in vain did she scour the whole apartment for the book; in vain did her eager glance rove round tables, shelves, and cupboards. Nowhere could she discover the book of which she was in search.

"D'Alençon must have taken it away already," said she. "It was a prudent thing to do." And she returned to her apartments, feeling almost certain that, this time, her scheme had been successful.

Meanwhile, the King was pursuing his journey towards Saint-Germain, where he arrived after an hour and a half of hard riding; he did not even ascend to the old castle, which rose in sombre majesty amid the houses scattered on the hill, but crossed the wooden bridge which at that period was situated opposite the tree which, even to-day, bears the name of Sully's oak. Then a signal was made to the flag-bedecked barges which followed the chase, to allow the King and his suite to cross the river and commence their sport.

Having crossed the river, all this joyous troop, animated by such diverse interests, immediately began to career,

with the King at their head, over that noble prairie which lies under the wooded heights of Saint-Germain, and which now suddenly assumed the appearance of some large piece of tapestry filled with figures of every conceivable colour, and of which the river gleaming at its edge represented the silver fringe.

In front of the King, who still rode his white horse, and was carrying his favourite falcon on his wrist, walked the beaters, dressed in green tunics and high boots; these men, encouraging with their shouts some half-dozen of dogs, searched the reeds along the water's edge.

At this moment the sun, hidden hitherto behind the clouds, suddenly emerged from the dark ocean in which it had been plunged, illuminating with its resplendent rays all the gold and jewels, as well as the eager eyes, of this gay company.

At that moment, and as though it had only been waiting for the sun to shine out and make its defeat more visible, a heron rose from its reedy bed, uttering a loud and prolonged cry.

"Ha! ha!" cried Charles, unhooding his falcon and launching it after the fugitive bird.

"Ha! ha!" shouted the whole company, by way of encouraging the falcon.

The latter, dazzled for a moment by the light, described a circle in the air; then, suddenly perceiving the heron, flew for it at its utmost speed.

The heron, however, which, like a wise bird, had risen at more than a hundred yards from the beaters, had gained a considerable distance, or rather height, while the falcon was being unhooded and was getting accustomed to the light. Consequently, when its foe perceived it, it had already attained a height of more than five hundred feet, and finding in that elevated region the breeze required for its powerful wings, was ascending rapidly.

"Ha! ha!" cried Charles, encouraging his falcon; "ha! ha! Bec-de-Fer, now prove your noble strain."

As though understanding this encouragement, the gallant bird, swift as an arrow, flew in a diagonal line to intersect the vertical course of the heron, which still kept mounting as though it would disappear into the ether.

"Ah! doubly dastard!" cried Charles, as if the fugitive could hear him, and galloping at full speed with his head

thrown backward, so as not for a moment to lose sight of the two birds—"Ah! doubly dastard, you flee. Bec-de-Fer is thorough-bred; wait! wait! Ha! ha! Bec-de-Fer!"

The struggle was indeed an exciting one as the two birds approached each other, or rather as the falcon drew near the heron.

The only question was which of them in this first attack would maintain the uppermost position. But fear gives stronger wings than courage has. The falcon, swept onwards in its flight, passed beneath the breast of the heron, and the latter, taking advantage of its position, struck the falcon a blow with its long beak.

The falcon, as though stabbed by a dagger, circled thrice round and round in apparent bewilderment, and for a moment the spectators thought it would come down. But, like a wounded warrior who rises with redoubled fury, it uttered a piercing shriek of menace and flew for the heron once again.

The heron had profited by its advantage, and, changing the direction of its flight, had made a double towards the forest, trying this time to escape by distance rather than by height.

But the falcon was a bird of noble strain, with the glance of a gerfalcon.

It repeated the former manœuvre, making diagonally for the heron, who uttered two or three cries of distress and tried to rise perpendicularly, as it had done the first time.

After this fine struggle had lasted a few seconds, the two birds seemed on the point of disappearing into the clouds. The heron looked no bigger than a lark, while the falcon resembled a black dot, growing each moment more imperceptible.

Neither Charles nor his courtiers attempted any longer to follow the two birds. All remained stationary, their eyes fixed on pursuer and pursued.

"Bravo! bravo! Bec-de-Fer!" suddenly shouted Charles. "Look, look, gentlemen, he is uppermost! ha! ha!"

"Egad! I confess I can't see either of them," said Henri.

"Nor I either," said Marguerite.

"Yes, but if you can't see them, Henriot, you can still hear them," said Charles—"the heron, at any rate. Do you hear, do you hear? he is asking for quarter!"

In point of fact, two or three plaintive

cries, audible only to a trained ear, reached the ground.

"Listen, listen," cried Charles; "now you will see them come down quicker than they rose." And, as the King pronounced the words, the two birds began to come in sight once more.

They were still merely two black dots, but from their difference in size it was easily seen that the falcon had the upper hand.

"Look! look!" cried Charles . . . "Bec-de-Fer has got him."

And sure enough, the heron, now dominated by the bird of prey, no longer even attempted to defend itself. It descended rapidly, repeatedly struck by the falcon, and replying only by cries. Suddenly it folded its wings and dropped down like a stone; but its adversary followed suit, and when the heron tried to resume its flight, dealt it a final blow with its powerful beak; it continued to fall, circling round and round. Finally, at the moment when it reached the ground, the falcon pounced upon it with a cry of triumph, which drowned the last shriek of its defeated victim.

"To the falcon! to the falcon!" cried Charles, as he galloped his horse towards the place where the birds had fallen.

Suddenly, however, he pulled up short, uttered a cry himself, let go his bridle and clung with one hand to his horse's mane, while with the other he grasped his stomach convulsively.

At this cry all the courtiers rushed towards him.

"It is nothing, nothing," said Charles, his eyes haggard and his face red and inflamed; "but I felt just now as if a red-hot iron had been plunged through my vitals. Forrard away! it is nothing."

And Charles resumed his gallop, while the Duc d'Alençon turned deadly pale.

"What has happened now?" asked Henri of Marguerite.

"I don't know; but did you see? my brother's face was purple."

"It isn't so, usually," said Henri.

The courtiers glanced at one another in amazement, and followed after the King. They arrived at the place where the two birds had fallen. The falcon was already devouring the heron's brain, and Charles leaped from his horse to view the combat closer.

But on reaching the ground he was obliged to cling to the saddle; the earth

reeled beneath him. He felt a violent inclination to sleep.

"Brother! brother! what ails you?" cried Marguerite.

"I feel as Porcia must have done when she had swallowed the live coals; I am on fire and my breath seems to be a flame."

So saying, the King gave a deep exhalation, and appeared astonished not to see flames issue from his lips.

Meanwhile the falcon had been captured and hooded, and the whole company had gathered round Charles.

"Well! well! what do you all want? Zounds! it is nothing, or if it is, I have had a touch of sunstroke. Come, come, to the chase, gentlemen! Yonder is a whole flock of wild-duck. Let go all the birds. 'Sdeath! we will amuse ourselves!"

The hawkers unhooded and let go at the same instant five or six falcons, which darted off in pursuit of the game, while the whole company, with the King at their head, made off again for the bank of the river.

"Well, what say you, Madame?" asked Henri.

"That the moment is favourable," said Marguerite, "and if the King does not come back, we can easily reach the forest from here."

Henri called the beater who was carrying the heron, and while the noisy and brilliant avalanche swept over the slope, which to-day forms the Terrace of Saint-Germain, he remained behind alone, as if to examine the body of the dead bird.

CHAPTER XX

THE PAVILION OF FRANÇOIS I.

FOWLING was a fine sport as carried on by kings at a time when kings were almost demi-gods, and the chase was not merely a pastime but an art.

Nevertheless, we must leave this Royal spectacle in order to penetrate to a part of the forest where all the actors in the scene just described will presently join us.

To the right of the *Allée des Violettes*—a long, leafy arcade, a mossy retreat where, amid the heather and lavender, a

hare from time to time pricks its ears uneasily—lies a glade far enough from the path not to be exposed to view, yet not so far but that from the glade you can see the drive.

In the middle of this glade, two men were lying in the grass on their travelling cloaks, with long swords by their side, while close to each of them was a bell-mouthed musketoon, called at that period a *poitrinal*. From a distance they resembled, by the elegance of their costume, those merry story-tellers described in the *Decameron*; though, from a nearer point of view, their formidable weapons rendered them more like those forest-bandits depicted from nature in his landscapes a hundred years later by Salvator Rosa.

One of the two was resting on a hand and knee, and listening eagerly like one of the hares or deer just alluded to.

"I fancied the chase was drawing quite close to us a moment ago," said he. "I even heard the shouts of the fowlers encouraging the falcon."

"And now," said the other, who seemed to await the development of affairs much more philosophically than his comrade, "now, I cannot hear a sound: they must have disappeared . . . I told you this was a bad place for observing. True, we cannot be seen, but neither can we see."

"Confound it! my dear Hannibal," said the first speaker, "we *must* conceal somewhere our own two mounts, to say nothing of the two led horses and these two mules, which are so heavily laden that I don't know how in the world they are going to keep up with us. Well, for my part I know nothing, except these aged beech-trees and venerable oaks, that can suitably perform this difficult task. Far from blaming M. de Mouy then, as you do, I am bold to say that I recognise, in all the preparations for this enterprise which he is directing, the profound instinct of a born conspirator."

"Good!" said the second of the men, in whom our reader has doubtless already clearly recognised Coconnas, "good, now you have let the cat out of the bag, as I was expecting. I have caught you. So we are conspirators, then."

"We are not conspirators, we are serving the King and the Queen."

"And *they* are conspirators, so that it comes to exactly the same thing, so far as we are concerned."

"I have told you, Coconnas," replied

La Mole, "that I put no constraint on you whatever to follow me in this adventure, which I am only undertaking on account of a private sentiment which you do not, and cannot share."

"Why! 'sdeath! who says you are constraining me? In the first place, I don't know the man who can force Coconnas to do what he doesn't choose to do; but do you imagine I am going to let you go without following you, more particularly when I see you going to the devil?"

"Hannibal! Hannibal!" said La Mole, "I believe I see her white horse yonder. It is strange how my heart beats, merely at the thought that she is coming."

"Yes, it is odd," said Coconnas, with a yawn, "my heart doesn't beat at all."

"It was not she," said La Mole. "What can have happened? I thought they were to come at noon."

"Only that it isn't yet noon, that's all, and we have still time to take a nap, if fancy."

In which conviction Coconnas stretched himself on his cloak by way of suiting the action to the word; but just as his head was touching the ground, he held up his finger and motioned to La Mole to be silent.

"What is it?" asked the latter.

"Silence! this time I hear something, and I am not mistaken."

"It is strange; I have listened in vain, and can hear nothing."

"You hear nothing?"

"No."

"Well," said Coconnas, getting up and laying his hand on La Mole's arm, "look at that stag."

"Where?"

"Over yonder."

And Coconnas pointed with his finger to the animal.

"Well?"

"Well, you will see."

La Mole looked at the stag. With its head bent in the act of browsing, it remained motionless, listening. Presently it lifted its head and its magnificent antlers, and listened in the direction from which the sound doubtless proceeded; then suddenly, for no apparent reason, it dashed away like lightning.

"Oho!" said La Mole, "I believe you are right, for the stag is making off."

"That is because it hears what you do not," said Coconnas.

In point of fact, a low, almost imperceptible sound stirred vaguely in the grass. For less practised ears, it might have been the wind; but for cavaliers like themselves it meant the distant gallop of horses.

La Mole was on his feet in an instant.

"Look out!" said he.

Coconnas rose, but more slowly; the vivaciousness of the Piedmontese seemed to be transferred to La Mole, while the indifference of the latter seemed to have taken possession of his friend,—the reason of this being, that in this adventure the one was acting from enthusiasm, the other contrary to his inclination.

Presently an even and rhythmic sound struck upon the ears of the two friends, the neighing of a horse made the animals, which were standing in readiness a few yards from them, prick up their ears, and there passed along the path, like a white spectre, a woman who, turning in their direction, made a mysterious signal and disappeared.

"The Queen!" they both exclaimed simultaneously.

"What does that mean?" said Coconnas.

"She beckoned thus," said La Mole. "which means: Presently . . ."

"No, like this," said Coconnas, "which means: Go . . ."

"That sign answers to: *Wait for me.*"

"No, it answers to: *Make your escape.*"

"Well!" said La Mole, "let each of us act upon his conviction. *You go, I shall remain.*"

Coconnas shrugged his shoulders and lay down again.

At the same instant, from the opposite direction taken by the Queen, but along the same path, there passed, riding furiously with loose reins, a troop of horsemen, whom the two friends recognised as staunch Protestants. Their horses leapt like the grasshoppers to which Job compared them; they appeared and vanished almost instantaneously.

"Confound it! this is getting serious," said Coconnas, getting up, "let us make for the pavilion."

"On the contrary, let us stay where we are," said La Mole. "If our plans are discovered, the King's attention will be directed in the first place towards the pavilion: besides, it was fixed as the general meeting-place."

"This time you may possibly be in the right," growled Coconnas.

Coconnas had hardly uttered the words when a horseman dashed like lightning through the trees, and clearing ditches, bushes, and every other obstacle, galloped up to the two gentlemen.

He held a pistol in each hand, guiding his horse's impetuous career solely with his knees.

"M. de Mouy!" cried Coconnas, uneasily, and now becoming more alert than La Mole, "M. de Mouy in flight! It's a case of seeking shelter, then?"

"Quick! quick!" cried the Huguenot, "clear off, all is lost! I have come out of my way to warn you. To horse!"

And as he had not slackened his pace while shouting these words, he was already far away when they were finished, and, consequently, before La Mole and Coconnas had completely realised their meaning.

"And the Queen?" shouted La Mole. But his voice was lost in space; De Mouy was already too far off to hear, much less to reply.

Coconnas had soon shaped his resolve. While La Mole remained motionless, gazing after De Mouy, who was disappearing through the branches as they gave way before him and closed again after his passage, Coconnas ran to the horses and brought them up, jumping upon his own and throwing the bridle of the other to La Mole, and prepared to ride off.

"Come! come!" said he, "I will repeat to you what De Mouy said: To horse! And De Mouy is a gentleman who gives good advice. To horse, to horse, La Mole!"

"One moment," said La Mole, "we came here for a certain object."

"Unless it was to get ourselves hanged," replied Coconnas, "I recommend you to lose no time. Oh! I know; you are going to stuff rhetoric down my throat; to paraphrase the word 'flee'; to tell me of Horace, who threw away his shield, and Epaminondas, who was brought home on his. I, for my part, will only say this: When M. de Mouy de Saint-Phale runs away, it is time for everybody else to follow his example."

"M. de Mouy de Saint-Phale," said La Mole, "is not charged with the duty of escorting Queen Marguerite; M. de Mouy de Saint-Phale is not her lover."

"Sdeath! sir, and he is quite right not to be, if his love made him act so foolishly as I see you intend to do. To the devil with the love which can cost two honest gentlemen their heads! 'Od's body! as King Charles says, we are conspirators, my dear fellow; and when one conspires unsuccessfully, one must needs make a bolt of it. To saddle, to saddle, La Mole!"

"Bolt, if you choose, my friend, I don't prevent you; nay, I urge you to do so. Your life is more valuable than mine, so defend it."

"You should say to me: 'Coconnas, let us be hanged together'; and not: 'Coconnas, escape by yourself.'"

"Bah! my friend," answered La Mole, "the rope is for peasants, not for gentlemen like ourselves."

"I begin to think," said Coconnas, with a sigh, "that the precaution I took was no ill-advised one."

"What precaution?"

"Of making friends with the executioner."

"You are a bird of ill-omen, my dear Coconnas."

"But look here, what are we to do?" cried the latter, impatiently.

"We must find the Queen again."

"Where?"

"I don't know . . . and find the King."

"Where?"

"I don't know, either . . . but find them we will, and do by our two selves what fifty men have not had the power or the courage to perform."

"You appeal to my vanity, Hyacinth; that is a bad sign."

"Well, come, to horse, and let us start!"

"Capital!"

La Mole was turning round to grasp the pommel of the saddle, but just as he was placing his foot in the stirrup, an imperious voice was heard.

"Halt there, and surrender!" said the voice.

At the same moment a figure appeared from behind an oak, then another, then at least thirty; these were the Light Horse, who, converting themselves into infantry, had crawled through the heather, and were scouring the forest.

"What did I tell you?" muttered Coconnas.

A sort of low roar was La Mole's sole reply.

The Light Horse were still some thirty yards from the two friends.

"What is it, gentlemen?" continued the Piedmontese, speaking aloud to the Lieutenant, and beneath his breath to La Mole.

The lieutenant ordered his men to take aim.

Coconnas went on below his breath :

"To saddle! La Mole, there is still time; jump on your horse, as I have told you a dozen times, and off."

Then, turning to the Light Horse :

"Don't shoot, gentlemen, you might kill your friends."

Then to La Mole :

"Through the trees; they will shoot badly, and miss us."

"It can't be done," said La Mole, "we can't take Marguerite's horse and the two mules; the animals would compromise her, while I will give them answers that will banish all suspicion. Go, my friend, go."

"Gentlemen," said Coconnas, drawing his sword, and raising it in the air, "we surrender."

The Light Horse raised their muskets again.

"But, first, why must we surrender?"

"You must ask the King of Navarre."

"What crime have we committed?"

"M. d'Alençon will tell you."

Coconnas and La Mole looked at each other; the mention of their enemy at such a moment was ill calculated to reassure them.

Neither of them, however, offered any resistance. Coconnas was told to dismount, which he did without a word. Both of them were then placed in the centre of the soldiers, and a move was made in the direction of the pavilion.

"You wanted to see the pavilion of François I.?" said Coconnas to La Mole, as they perceived beyond the trees the walls of a charming Gothic erection. "Well, it seems you are going to see it."

La Mole did not reply, and merely held out his hand to Coconnas.

By the side of this charming pavilion, built in the time of Louis XII., and called the pavilion of François I., because the latter always chose it as the rendezvous when hunting, was a kind of hut erected for the prickers, which at the present moment was lost, so to speak, beneath a heap of muskets, halberds, and gleaming swords, like a mole-hill under a whitening

crop of corn. It was into this hut that the prisoners had been conducted.

Now to throw some light on the situation, so far a decidedly nebulous one, more especially for the two friends, by relating what had actually taken place :

The Protestant gentlemen had assembled as arranged in the Pavilion of François I., of which De Mouy, as we know, had procured the key.

Masters of the forest—as they supposed, at least—they had posted sentries here and there, whom the Light Horse, by means of exchanging their white scarves for red ones—a precaution due to the zealous ingenuity of M. de Nancey—had surprised and seized and without striking a blow.

The Light Horse had continued to beat the forest surrounding the pavilion, but De Mouy, who, as we have said, was awaiting Henri at the end of the *Allée des Violettes*, had seen these red scarves furtively advancing, and his suspicions had immediately been roused. He had then ridden aside to escape observation, and had noticed that the vast circle was contracting in such a way as to drive the forest and surround the pavilion.

At the same moment, at the end of the principal ride, he had seen the white plumes and flashing arquebuses of the King's guards. Presently he recognised Charles himself, while in the opposite direction he perceived the King of Navarre.

He had then made the sign of the cross in the air with his hat, the pre-arranged signal to intimate that all was lost.

At this signal Henri had ridden back and disappeared.

De Mouy instantly set spurs to his horse and fled, shouting in his flight the words of warning to La Mole and Coconnas which have been related.

King Charles, who had noticed the disappearance of Henri and Marguerite, had arrived escorted by M. d'Alençon, in the expectation of seeing both of them brought out of the hut in which the guards had been directed to shut up all who should be found, not only in the pavilion, but in the forest as well.

D'Alençon, filled with confidence, rode beside the King, the acuteness of whose pain increased his ill-humour. Two or three times he had almost fainted, and once he had even vomited blood.

"Come! come! make haste," said the King, on reaching the pavilion; "I am in a hurry to get back to the Louvre. Unearth these Heretics from their hole; this is the Feast of St. Blaise, first cousin to St. Bartholomew."

At the King's words, all this swarm of pikes and arquebuses set itself in motion, and the Huguenots who had been seized both in the Pavilion and in the forest were compelled to come out one by one from the hut. But amongst them was no King of Navarre, no Marguerite, and no De Mouy.

"Well!" said the King, "where is Henri, where is Margot? You promised me they would be here, D'Alençon, and, 'Od's body! sir, you will have to find them."

"We have not so much as seen the King and Queen of Navarre, Sire," said M. de Nancey.

"But here they come," said the Duchesse de Nevers.

True enough, at this very moment, at the end of a forest drive, leading from the river, appeared Henri and Margot, both of them as cool and collected as though nothing had happened, both with falcons on their wrists, and riding amorously so close together that their mounts, as they galloped side by side, seemed as fond as the riders, and to be nuzzling up to each other as though to snatch a caress.

Thereupon D'Alençon, in his anger and disappointment, had the adjacent parts of the forest searched, and La Mole and Coconnas were discovered in hiding beneath their bower of ivy.

They, too, were compelled to enter the circle formed by the surrounding guards. Not being Princes, however, they were unable to put such a bold face on matters as Henri and Marguerite. La Mole was too pale, Coconnas was over red.

CHAPTER XXI

INVESTIGATIONS

THE sight which struck the two young men upon their entrance within the circle was one of those which a man can never forget, even though he has seen it but once, and then only for a moment.

Charles had watched, as they passed in

turn before him, all the gentlemen who had been confined in the prickers' hut and brought out one by one by the Guards. He and D'Alençon scanned each fresh prisoner with eager eyes, expecting to see the King of Navarre brought out in his turn. But their expectations had been disappointed. That was not enough; they must know what had become of him. Accordingly, when Henri and his young wife were seen appearing at the end of the drive, D'Alençon turned pale, while Charles felt a load lifted from his heart, for he had an instinctive desire that all his brother had forced him to do should recoil upon his own head.

"He will escape again!" muttered François, turning pale.

At this moment the King was seized with such violent pains in the stomach that he let go his bridle, grasped his sides with both hands, screaming like a man delirious. Henri promptly went to him, but by the time he had covered the two hundred yards which separated him from his brother-in-law, the King had recovered.

"Where have you come from, sir?" said the King, in a tone of sternness which alarmed Marguerite.

"Why . . . from the chase, my brother?" he replied.

"The chase was along the river and not in the forest."

"My falcon went for a pheasant, Sire, just as we were stopping behind to examine the heron."

"And where is the pheasant?"

"Here; a fine cock, isn't it?"

And Henri, with an air of the utmost innocence, showed Charles the gaily plumaged bird.

"Ah!" said Charles; "and having killed the pheasant, why didn't you join us again?"

"Because he flew towards the park, Sire; so that, when we had got to the bank of the river, we saw you more than a mile in front of us going up towards the forest, and began at once to gallop in pursuit of you, for being of your Majesty's party we didn't wish to desert it."

"And all these gentlemen," replied Charles, "were they invited also?"

"Which gentlemen?" answered Henri, throwing round him an interrogatory glance.

"Why, zounds! your Huguenots," said Charles; "anyhow, if they *were* invited, it was not by me."

"No, Sire," answered Henri, "but perhaps by M. d'Alençon."

"M. d'Alençon! what do you mean?"

"By me!" said the Duke.

"Why, yes, my brother," replied Henri, "didn't you announce yesterday that you were King of Navarre? Well, the Huguenots who requested you for their King have come to thank you for accepting the crown and the King for bestowing it. Is it not so, gentlemen?"

"Yes! yes!" shouted twenty voices: "Long live the Duc d'Alençon! long live King Charles!"

"I am not King of the Huguenots," said François, turning white with anger; then he added, glancing stealthily at Charles:—"and I hope I never shall be."

"Never mind that!" said Charles; "all this looks somewhat strange, you know, Henri."

"Sire," said the King of Navarre, in a firm tone, "it looks as if I were undergoing examination?"

"And if I told you I was examining you, what should you say?"

"That I am a King as you are, Sire," said Henri, proudly, "for it is not the crown, but birth, which constitutes royalty, and that I will answer to my brother and my friend, but never to my judge."

"I should much like to know, however," muttered Charles, "what to believe for once in my life."

"Let them bring up M. de Mouy and you shall know," said D'Alençon: "he must have been seized."

"Is M. de Mouy among the prisoners?" asked the King.

Henri felt a moment's uneasiness and exchanged glances with Marguerite; but this moment was of short duration.

"M. de Mouy is not among the prisoners," said M. de Nancey; "some of our men think they saw him, but no one is certain."

D'Alençon muttered an oath.

"Why, Sire," said Marguerite, pointing to La Mole and Coconnas, who had heard the whole conversation, and on whose intelligence she thought she could rely, "here are two of M. d'Alençon's gentlemen, question them and they will answer you."

The Duke felt the thrust.

"I have had them arrested as a proof that they do not belong to me," said the Duke.

The King looked at the two friends, and started on seeing La Mole again.

"Oho! this Provençal fellow again!" said he.

Coconnas bowed gracefully.

"What were you doing when you were arrested," said the King.

"Sire, we were relating tales of love and war."

"On horseback! armed to the teeth! prepared for flight!"

"No, Sire," said Coconnas, "your Majesty has been wrongly informed. We were lying under the shade of a beech—*sub tegmine fagi*."

"Oh! you were lying under the shade of a beech?"

"Yes, and we might even have escaped, had we suspected that we had in any way incurred your Majesty's displeasure. Look here, gentlemen," said Coconnas, turning to the Light Horse, "on your word as soldiers, don't you think we could have escaped had we wished to do so?"

"As a matter of fact," said the Lieutenant, "these gentlemen made no attempt to get away."

"Because their horses were too far off," said the Duc d'Alençon.

"I humbly beg Monseigneur's pardon," said Coconnas, "but I was on my horse and my friend the Comte Lerac de La Mole was holding his by the bridle."

"Is this true, gentlemen?" said the King.

"Quite true, Sire," replied the Lieutenant; "M. de Coconnas even dismounted on seeing us."

Coconnas smiled, as much as to say: "There, you see, Sire."

"But these led horses, these mules, and the baggage with which they are laden?" asked François.

"Well," said Coconnas, "are we stable-men? You had better look for the groom who was in charge of them."

"There is no groom," said the Duke, angrily.

"Then he must have taken fright and run away," replied Coconnas; "you can't expect a clodhopper to keep as cool a head as a gentleman."

"Always the same system," said D'Alençon, grinding his teeth. "Fortunately, Sire, I have warned you that these gentlemen have for some days ceased to be in my service."

"I?" said Coconnas, "am I so unfortunate as no longer to belong to your Highness? . . ."

"Sdeath, sir, you know that better

than anyone else, since you sent in your resignation in a very impudent letter, which I have kept, thank goodness, and which, luckily, I have upon me at this moment."

"Oh!" said Coconnas, "I hoped your Highness had forgiven me for a letter written under a first impulse of annoyance. I had been informed that your Highness had attempted to strangle my friend, La Mole, in one of the corridors of the Louvre."

"What's that he says?" interrupted the King.

"I had thought that your Highness was alone," continued La Mole, ingenuously, "but since I have learnt that three other persons . . ."

"Silence," said Charles, "we have heard enough. Henri," said he to the King of Navarre, "have I your word that you will not attempt to escape?"

"I give your Majesty my word."

"Go back to the Louvre with M. de Nancey, and await my decision in your room. You, gentlemen, deliver up your swords."

La Mole looked at Marguerite, who smiled.

La Mole at once handed his sword to the Captain nearest to him, seeing which, Coconnas did the same.

"And has M. de Mouy been found?" asked the King.

"No, Sire," said M. de Nancy, "either he is not in the forest, or he has escaped."

"So much the worse," said the King. "Let us go back; I am cold; I feel dazed."

"Sire, it is doubtless your anger," said François.

"Yes, perhaps; my eyes grow misty. Where are the prisoners? I don't see them. Is it night already, eh? Oh, heavens, I am on fire! . . . Help! help!"

And the unhappy King, letting go his bridle and extending his arms, fell backwards into the arms of his courtiers, whom this second attack filled with consternation.

François, apart from the rest, wiped the perspiration from his brow, for he alone knew the cause of his brother's sufferings.

The King of Navarre, already guarded by M. de Nancey, surveyed this scene with growing astonishment.

"Well, well," he muttered, with that marvellous intuition which made him at

times as one inspired, "supposing it were going to turn out fortunate that my escape had been prevented?"

He glanced at Marguerite, whose eyes, dilating with surprise, looked from him to the King, and back again to her husband.

This time the King had become unconscious. A litter was brought, and he was placed upon it. The litter was covered with a cloak taken from the shoulders of one of the horsemen, and the procession moved off slowly towards Paris, from which a band of cheerful conspirators and a King in high spirits had been seen setting out that morning, and to which now returned a dying monarch, surrounded by rebel prisoners.

Marguerite, who, throughout this scene, had neither lost her personal freedom, nor that of her mind, gave a final signal of intelligence to her husband, and then passed so close to La Mole that he was able to catch these two Greek words, as they dropped from her lips:

"Μη δεῦδε."

That is to say:

"Have no fear."

"What did she say to you?" asked Coconnas.

"She told me to have no fear," answered La Mole.

"So much the worse," muttered the Piedmontese, "that means to say that it's a bad look out for us. Every time those words have been addressed to me by way of encouragement, I have received at that very instant either a bullet somewhere, or a sword-thrust in my body, or a flower-pot on my head. 'Have no fear,' be it spoken in Hebrew or Greek, in Latin or French, has always meant for me, 'Look out for yourself!'"

"Forward, gentlemen!" said the Lieutenant of the Light Horse.

"If I am not indiscreet, sir," asked Coconnas, "where are we being taken?"

"To Vincennes, I believe," said the Lieutenant.

"I should prefer to go elsewhere," said Coconnas, "but there, you can't always go where you would like to go."

During the journey the King had regained consciousness, and his strength was somewhat restored.

At Nanterre he had even wanted to remount, but had been dissuaded.

"Go and inform Master Ambroise Paré," said Charles, on reaching the Louvre.

He descended from the litter, mounted the staircase leaning on the arm of Tavannes, and reached his apartment, to which he forbade anyone to follow him.

Everyone noticed that he looked very grave; during the whole journey he was buried in deep reflection, not addressing a word to anybody, nor troubling any longer either about conspiracy or conspirators. It was plain that it was his illness which was preoccupying him—this illness so sudden, so strange, so acute, and of which several of the symptoms were identical with those observed in his brother François II. shortly before his death.

Nobody was therefore surprised that all access to the King was forbidden, except in the case of Ambroise Paré Misanthropy, as was well known, was deeply rooted in the King's disposition.

Charles entered his bedroom, seated himself on a couch, and leaned his head against the cushions; then, reflecting that Ambroise Paré might be absent from home, and therefore slow in coming, he determined to employ the interval of waiting profitably.

Accordingly he clapped his hands, and an attendant appeared.

"Inform the King of Navarre that I wish to speak to him," said the King.

The man bowed and withdrew.

Charles let his head fall backwards; an alarming heaviness of the brain scarce left him the faculty of connected thought; a sort of mist floated before his eyes; his throat was parched, and he had already emptied a whole jug of water without quenching his thirst.

As he lay in this drowsy condition, the door opened, and Henri appeared. M. de Nancey followed at his heels, but remained behind in the ante-chamber.

The King of Navarre waited until the door had been closed behind him. Then he stepped forward.

"Sire," said he, "you have sent for me; I am here."

The King started on hearing his voice, and held out his hand in a mechanical fashion.

"Sire," said Henri, letting both hands drop to his sides, "your Majesty forgets that I am no longer your brother, but your prisoner."

"Ah! true," said Charles; "thank you for reminding me; further, I remember that you promised me that, when we were

alone together, you would answer me frankly."

"I am ready to keep my promise; put your questions, Sire."

The King poured some water into his hand and bathed his forehead.

"What truth is there in the Duc d'Alençon's charge against you? Come, Henri, answer."

"It is true only in part: it was M. d'Alençon who was to escape, and I was to accompany him."

"And why were you to accompany him?" asked Charles; "are you, then, dissatisfied with my treatment of you, Henri?"

"No, Sire, quite the contrary; I am perfectly satisfied with your Majesty's behaviour towards me; and God, who reads the heart, knows what deep affection I bear towards my brother and my King."

"It seems to me," said Charles, "that it is unnatural to fly from those whom we love, and who love us."

"Yes," said Henri, "and I was not flying from those who love, but from those who detest me. Will your Majesty permit me to speak quite openly?"

"Speak, sir."

"Those who detest me here, Sire, are M. d'Alençon and the Queen-Mother."

"As to M. d'Alençon, I will not say," replied Charles; "but the Queen-Mother loads you with attentions."

"It is for that very reason that I distrust her, Sire, and I have very good reason to do so."

"To distrust *her*?"

"Her and those who surround her. You know, Sire, that the misfortune of Princes is not always to be badly, but too well served."

"Explain yourself; you have pledged yourself to tell me everything."

"And your Majesty sees that I am doing so."

"Continue."

"Your Majesty loves me, you say?"

"That is to say, that I loved you before your treason, Henriot."

"Assume that you love me still, Sire."

"Be it so."

"If you love me, you ought to desire that I should live, ought you not?"

"I should have been grieved had any misfortune happened to you."

"Well, Sire, your Majesty has been twice in danger of being grieved."

"How so?"

"Yes; for twice has Providence alone preserved my life. It is true that on the second occasion Providence assumed the guise of your Majesty."

"And what guise did it assume on the first occasion?"

"That of a man who would be greatly astonished to find himself mistaken for Providence—I mean René. Yes, Sire, it was you who saved me from the steel."

"And René?" said the King.

"René saved me from being poisoned."

"By the Lord! you have all the luck, Henriot," said the King, attempting a smile which his sharp pain transformed into a nervous contraction. "That is not René's usual practice."

"Two miracles, then, saved me, sire: a miracle of repentance on the Florentine's part, a miracle of kindness on yours. Well, I confess to your Majesty, I am afraid lest heaven should grow tired of working miracles, and I desired to escape in obedience to the maxim: Heaven helps those who help themselves."

"Why did you not tell me this sooner, Henri?"

"If I had said this yesterday, I should have been an informer."

"Whereas to-day? . . ."

"To-day, it is quite different; I am accused, and am defending myself."

"Are you sure about the first attempt, Henriot?"

"As sure as I am about the second."

"There was an attempt to poison you?"

"Yes."

"With what?"

"With an opiate?"

"And how can people be poisoned with an opiate?"

"Egod! Sire, you'd better ask René; he is skilful at poisoning with gloves . . ."

Charles frowned; then gradually his face unbent.

"Yes, yes," said he, as though speaking to himself; "it is only natural for all creatures to flee from death; so why should not intelligence act in the same way as instinct would do?"

"Well, Sire," asked Henri, "is your Majesty satisfied with my plain speaking, and do you believe that I have told you everything?"

"Yes, Henriot, yes, you are a good fellow. And you think that those who have a grudge against you are not tired, and will have recourse to fresh attempts?"

"Sire, every evening I am surprised to find myself still alive."

"It is because they know I love you, Henriot, that they seek your death. But, make your mind easy; they shall be punished for their ill-will. Meanwhile, you are free."

"Free to leave Paris, Sire?"

"No; you know I can't get on without you. Why, ten thousand devils! I must have *someone* to love me."

"In that case, Sire, if your Majesty wishes to keep me with you, grant me a favour . . ."

"What is it?"

"That you will keep me, not as a friend, but as a prisoner."

"What! as a prisoner?"

"Why, yes. Does not your Majesty see that it is your friendship which is my ruin?"

"And you prefer my hatred?"

"An apparent hatred, Sire. This hatred will save me; so long as they think I am in disgrace, they will be in less of a hurry to see me dead."

"Henriot," said Charles, "I don't know what you desire, or what you are aiming at, but, whatever it be, I shall be much surprised if you fail to realise your object."

"I may rely then on the King's severity?"

"Yes."

"In that case, I shall feel more easy . . . Now, what are your Majesty's orders?"

"Return to your room, Henriot. For myself, I am in pain; I shall see my dogs and then go to bed."

"Sire," said Henri; "your Majesty should have summoned a physician; your attack this morning is perhaps more serious than you imagine."

"I have sent for Paré, Henri."

"Then I shall go away with an easier mind."

"Upon my soul," said the King, "I believe you are the only one of all my family who really loves me."

"Is that your sincere opinion, Sire?"

"On the word of a gentleman."

"Well, then! hand me over to M. de Nancey as a man whom your anger will not let live for another month; by that means I shall love you for a long time."

"Monsieur de Nancey!" cried Charles. The Captain of the Guard entered.

"I place in your charge the most guilty person in my realm," went on the King;

"you will answer for his safe-keeping with your life."

And Henri, with an air of crest-fallen consternation, went out behind M. de Nancey.

CHAPTER XXII

ACTÆON

CHARLES, left by himself, was surprised to see neither of his two faithful friends appear; these two faithful friends were his nurse Madeleine and his greyhound Actæon.

"Madeleine must have gone to sing her psalms with some Huguenot or other of her acquaintance," he said to himself, "and Actæon is still sulky with me for the cut of the whip that I gave him this morning."

Charles took a candle and went into the nurse's room. The worthy woman was not there. A door of her room led, as we remember, to his armoury. He stepped towards this door.

But, in his passage, he was seized again by one of those attacks which he had already experienced, and which seemed to fall upon him with the utmost suddenness. His sufferings were as though a red-hot iron had been plunged into his body. He was consumed by unquenchable thirst; seeing a cup of milk on a table, he swallowed it at a gulp and felt somewhat relieved.

Then he took up the candle which he had placed on the table, and entered the closet.

To his great surprise, Actæon did not come forward to meet him. Had the dog been shut up? In that case, he would have known that his master had returned from the chase, and would have barked.

Charles called and whistled, but no hound appeared.

He went a little further, and as the light of the candle penetrated to the end of the closet, he saw in the corner an inert mass lying extended on the floor.

"Halloa, Actæon, halloa!" said Charles.

And he whistled again; but the great dog never stirred.

Charles ran to him and felt him with

his hand; the poor beast was stiff and cold. From his jaws, contracted by pain, had fallen some drops of frothy and blood-stained saliva. The dog had found in the room one of his master's caps, and had been fain to die with his head resting against this object, which represented to him a friend.

At this sight, which made him forget his own suffering, and restored to him all his energy, the King boiled over with anger, and would have shouted for help; for, reserved though their greatness makes them, Princes are yet not exempt from the impulse to that course which is the first to suggest itself to the ordinary man for the purpose of satisfying his anger or of obtaining protection. But Charles reflected that some act of treachery had been committed, and remained silent.

Next he knelt down beside the dog, and with expert glance examined the body. The dog's eyes were glassy, its tongue red and covered with pustules. The symptoms were so strange that Charles shuddered.

Then, putting on his gloves again, which he had removed and placed in his belt, he raised the animal's lips in order to examine the teeth, and noticed in their interstices some white fragments adhering to the sharp edges.

He pulled out these fragments, and found that they were bits of paper.

The parts of the jaws near which this paper had been were violently inflamed, the gums swollen, and the skin eaten away as though by vitriol.

Charles looked round him attentively. On the carpet lay two or three morsels of paper similar to the fragments he had found in the dog's mouth. One of these pieces, larger than the rest, showed traces of an engraving on wood.

The King's hair stood on end as he recognised a fragment of the picture representing a nobleman fowling, which Actæon had torn from the book.

"Ah!" said he, turning pale, "the book was poisoned."

Then, suddenly recollecting:

"A thousand demons!" he cried; "I touched each page with my finger, and at each page I put my finger in my mouth to wet it. This fainting, this pain, this vomiting . . . I am a dead man!"

Charles remained for an instant motionless beneath the weight of this appalling thought. Then, rising with a muffled cry

of pain and rage, he rushed to the door of his closet.

"Master René!" he cried; "Master René the Florentine! let someone run to the Pont Saint-Michel and bring him; he must be here within ten minutes. One of you mount a horse, and take another horse with you, so that he may get here the sooner. If Master Ambroise Paré arrives, let him be told to wait."

One of the guards went off at full speed to execute the King's order.

"Oh!" muttered Charles, "I will find out who gave that book to Henriot, if I have to put everybody to the torture."

And with the sweat standing out on his forehead, his hands clenched, and his breast heaving, Charles remained with his eyes fastened on his hound's dead body.

Ten minutes later, the Florentine knocked timidly, and not without uneasiness, at the King's door. There are some consciences for which the sky is never clear.

"Enter," said Charles.

The perfumer appeared. Charles walked up to him with an imperious air, and with contracted lips.

"Your Majesty sent for me," said René, trembling all over.

"You are an expert chemist, are you not?"

"Sire . . ."

"And you know as much as the cleverest physicians do?"

"Your Majesty exaggerates."

"No; my mother has told me so. Besides, I have confidence in you, and would rather consult you than any other. Here," he continued, stepping from in front of the hound's body; "look, I beg of you, at what this animal has between its teeth, and tell me what it died of."

While René, candle in hand, stooped down, as much in order to conceal his emotion as to obey the King, Charles, standing up, with his eyes fixed upon him, waited, with an impatience easy to be understood, for the word that would pronounce his own death-sentence or be the guarantee of his safety.

"Sire," said René, trembling, "here are very alarming symptoms."

Charles felt an icy shiver run through his veins and penetrate to his heart.

"Yes," said he, "the dog has been poisoned, has he not?"

"I fear so, Sire."

"With what kind of poison?"

"A mineral poison, I fancy."

"Could you say with absolute certainty that he has been poisoned?"

"Yes, no doubt, if I were to open the stomach and examine it."

"Open it, then; I wish to have no doubt in the matter."

"I must call in someone to help me."

"I will help you," said Charles.

"You, Sire!"

"Yes, I. And, supposing he has been poisoned, what symptoms shall we find?"

"Redness and arborisations of the stomach."

"Come," said Charles, "let us get to work."

With a cut of his scalpel, René opened the greyhound's breast and pulled the two sides apart, while Charles, with one knee on the ground, held the light for him with a trembling hand.

"See, Sire," said René, "here are evident traces. This redness is what I told you we should find; these veins tinged with blood, resembling the roots of a tree, are what I designated by the term arborisations. I find here all that I was looking for."

"The dog has been poisoned, then?"

"Yes, Sire."

"With a mineral poison?"

"In all probability."

"What symptoms would a man feel who, by any accident, swallowed this same poison?"

"Great heaviness in the head, internal heat and burning, as though he had swallowed live coals, pains in the bowels and vomiting."

"And thirst?" asked Charles.

"An unquenchable thirst."

"That is it, exactly," muttered the King.

"Sire, I seek in vain the object of all these questions."

"What's the good of your seeking? you have no need to know. Answer my questions, that is all you have to do."

"Your Majesty may question me."

"What antidote should be administered to a man who had swallowed the same poison as my dog?"

René reflected for a moment.

"There are several mineral poisons," said he: "I should like to know, before answering, which is the one in question. Has your Majesty any idea how the dog came to be poisoned?"

"Yes," said Charles; "he ate a leaf out of a book."

"A leaf out of a book?"

"Yes."

"And has your Majesty the book?"

"Here it is," said Charles, taking the manuscript on Venery from the shelf where he had laid it, and showing it to René.

René gave a start of surprise which did not escape the King's notice.

"He has eaten a leaf of this book?" stammered René.

"Yes, this one."

And Charles showed the torn page.

"May I tear out another leaf, Sire?"

"Do so."

René tore out a leaf and held it to the candle. The paper caught fire, and a strong alliaceous smell spread through the room.

"He has been poisoned with a mixture of arsenic."

"You are sure of it?"

"As sure as though I had prepared it myself."

"And the antidote? . . ."

René shook his head.

"What!" said Charles, in a hollow voice, "you do not know the remedy?"

"The best and most efficacious remedy is white of eggs beaten up in milk; but . . ."

"But . . . what?"

"It would have to be administered immediately, otherwise . . ."

"Otherwise?"

"Sire, it is a terrible poison," repeated René.

"It does not kill immediately, however," said Charles.

"No, but it kills surely; the time matters but little, and is often hard to calculate."

Charles leaned against the marble table.

"Now," said he, placing his hand on the other's shoulder, "you know this book?"

"I, Sire!" said René, turning pale.

"Yes, you; you betrayed yourself when you saw it."

"Sire, I swear to you . . ."

"René," said Charles, "listen carefully to this: You poisoned the Queen of Navarre with gloves; you poisoned the Prince de Porcian with the fumes of a lamp; you tried to poison M. de Condé with a scent apple. René, I will tear off your flesh in strips with red-hot pincers, unless you tell me whom this book belongs to."

The Florentine saw that the King's

anger was not to be trifled with, and determined to face the matter out.

"And if I speak the truth, Sire, who will guarantee that I shall not be punished more severely than if I keep silence?"

"I will."

"Will you give me your Royal word?"

"On my word of honour, your life shall be saved," said the King.

"In that case, I will tell you that the book is mine," said René.

"Yours!" said Charles, recoiling and glaring at the prisoner.

"Yes, mine."

"And how did it come to leave your hands?"

"Her Majesty the Queen-Mother took it from my house."

"The Queen-Mother!" cried Charles.

"Yes."

"But with what object?"

"With the object, I believe, of giving it to the King of Navarre, who had asked the Duc d'Alençon for a book of the kind in order that he might study fowling."

"Oh!" cried Charles, "I understand it all now. In point of fact, the book was in Henriot's room. This is the hand of fate, and I submit to its chastisement."

At this moment Charles was seized with a dry and violent cough, followed by fresh internal pains. He uttered two or three stifled cries and fell back on a chair.

"What is the matter, Sire?" asked René, in a tone of alarm.

"Nothing," said Charles; "only I am thirsty, give me something to drink."

René filled a glass with water and gave it with a trembling hand to Charles, who swallowed it at a gulp.

"Now," said Charles, taking a pen and dipping it in ink, "write in this book."

"What must I write?"

"What I am going to dictate to you:"

"This 'Manual on Fowling' was given by me to the Queen-Mother, Catherine de'Medici."

René took the pen and wrote.

"Now, sign it."

The Florentine added his signature.

"You have promised me my life," said the perfumer.

"Yes, and I will keep my word."

"But what about the Queen-Mother?" said René.

"Oh!" said Charles, "that has nothing to do with me; if you are attacked, defend yourself."

"Sire, may I quit France, if I believe my life to be in danger?"

"I will answer that question in a fortnight."

"But meanwhile . . ."

Charles, with a frown, placed his fingers on his pallid lips.

"Oh! make your mind easy, Sire."

And the Florentine, only too delighted at getting off so cheaply, bowed, and withdrew.

As he went out, the nurse appeared at the door.

"What is the matter, my Charlot?" said she.

"Nurse, I have been riding in the wet, and it has made me ill."

"You look pale indeed, my Charlot."

"It is because I am weak. Give me your arm, nurse, and take me to bed."

The nurse advanced quickly. Charles leaned on her, and reached his bed-chamber.

"Now," said Charles, "I will put myself to bed without help."

"And if Master Ambroise Paré comes?"

"Tell him that I am better, and do not require his services."

"But what will you take in the meantime?"

"Oh! a very simple medicine," said Charles, "white of eggs beaten up in milk. By the bye, nurse," he continued, "poor Actæon is dead. He must be buried, to-morrow morning, in a corner of the gardens of the Louvre. He was one of my best friends . . . I will have a monument put up to his memory . . . if I have time left for it!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE KEEP OF VINCENNES

IN accordance with the King's orders, Henri was taken that same evening to the Keep of Vincennes. This was the name given at that period to the famous Castle, of which nothing remains at the present day but a mere ruin, a colossal fragment, sufficient to give an idea of its former grandeur.

The journey was made in a litter. Four guards rode at each side, and M. de Nancey, the bearer of the order which

would throw open to Henri the doors of his protecting prison, preceded the litter. At the postern-gate of the donjon a halt was made. M. de Nancey dismounted, unlocked the door, and respectfully bade the King alight.

Henri obeyed without remark. Any abode seemed to him safer than the Louvre, and the more doors were locked upon him, the more doors would there be between Catherine de' Medici and himself.

Walking between two soldiers, the royal prisoner crossed the drawbridge, passed through three doors in the lower floor of the donjon, and three others at the bottom of the staircase; then, still preceded by M. de Nancey, ascended to the first floor. The Captain of the Guard, seeing the King preparing to ascend higher, said to him:

"Stop there, Monseigneur."

"Ah!" said Henri, "it seems I am to be honoured by being given the first floor."

"Sire," replied M. de Nancey, "you will be treated as a crowned head."

"The devil I shall!" said Henri to himself; "two or three floors higher would have been no humiliation. I shall be too comfortable here, and suspicion will be aroused."

"Will your Majesty be good enough to follow me?" said M. de Nancey.

"*Ventre Saint-Gris!*" said the King of Navarre, "there is no question here, as you know, sir, of what I will, or will not do, but of what my brother Charles orders. Does he order me to follow you?"

"Yes, Sire."

"In that case, sir, I will do so."

They entered a kind of corridor, at the end of which they came to a large hall; the walls were dark, and the whole aspect of the place absolutely funereal.

Henri looked round with a glance which betokened some uneasiness.

"Where are we?" said he.

"We are crossing the Hall of Torture, Monseigneur."

"Ah! indeed!" said the King.

And he looked round more attentively.

The apartment was but scantily furnished: jugs and wooden horses for the 'water' torture; pins and mallets for the 'boot' torture; some stone seats intended for the unhappy wretches awaiting torture, ran almost entirely round the hall. Above these seats, on the seats themselves, and on the floor below them, were

iron rings let into the stone, and arranged according to the requirements of the executioner's art, their closeness to the seats clearly indicating that they were there to accommodate the limbs of those who occupied the seats.

Henri passed on without a word, but without missing a single detail of all this hideous apparatus, in which the story of past suffering was, so to speak, written upon the walls.

The attention which Henri was paying to the objects around him made him neglect to look where he was treading, and all of a sudden he stumbled.

"Halloa!" said he, "what is that?"

And he pointed to a sort of furrow hollowed in the damp flags which formed the floor.

"That is the gutter, Sire."

"Does it rain here, then?"

"Yes, Sire, . . . blood."

"Ha! ha! very good," said Henri: "shall we soon come to my room?"

"Yes, Monseigneur, you are there," observed a shadowy form looming through the darkness, and growing more distinct as it approached.

Henri thought he knew the voice, and on taking another step or two, recognised the face.

"Why! Beaulieu, it is you," said he, "and what the devil brings you here?"

"Sire, I have just received my appointment as Governor of the Fortress of Vincennes."

"Well, my dear friend, your beginning does you credit; a King for your prisoner, that's not so bad, eh?"

"Pardon me, Sire," replied Beaulieu, "but I have already admitted two gentlemen before your arrival."

"Who are they? Oh! I beg your pardon, perhaps I am committing an indiscretion. If so, take it that I have not asked the question."

"I have not been commanded to secrecy, Monseigneur. They are MM. de La Mole and de Coconnas."

"Ah! true, I saw them arrested, poor fellows; and how do they bear this misfortune?"

"In quite different fashions: one is merry, the other sad; one sings, the other groans."

"And which of them groans?"

"M. de La Mole, Sire."

"Upon my word," said Henri, "I can understand the fellow who groans better

than I can the one who sings. From what I have seen of it, a prison is not exactly a lively place. And on what floor are they lodged?"

"Quite at the top, on the fourth floor."

Henri gave a sigh. That was where he himself would have preferred to be.

"Come, Monsieur de Beaulieu, be good enough to show me my room. I am in a hurry to be there, since I am very tired with my day."

"Here it is, Monseigneur," pointing Henri to an open door.

"Number two," said Henri; "and why not number one?"

"Because it is engaged, Monseigneur."

"Ah! then it appears you are expecting a prisoner of higher rank than myself?"

"I didn't say it was for a prisoner, Monseigneur."

"Then who is it for?"

"I hope Monseigneur will not press that question, for I should be compelled, by refusing to answer it, to fail in the respect I owe him."

"Ah! that is another matter," said Henri.

And he became more thoughtful than before; this "number one" was evidently puzzling him.

For the rest, the Governor did not belie his first politeness. With countless oratorical cautions he installed Henri in his chamber, made every apology for anything which might be lacking to his comfort, placed two soldiers at the door, and withdrew.

"Now we will visit the others," said the Governor, addressing the turnkey.

The turnkey walked in front. They went back by the way they had come crossed the Hall of Torture, and, passing through the corridor, reached the staircase; then, still following his guide, M. de Beaulieu ascended three stages.

On arriving at this point, which, including the first, made four floors, the turnkey opened successively three doors each embellished with two locks and three enormous bolts.

He had hardly touched the third of these doors when a cheerful voice was heard exclaiming:

"Hi! 'sdeath! open the door, if only to give us some fresh air; your stove is so hot that I am almost stifled."

And Coconnas, whom the reader has doubtless recognised by his favourite expletive, sprang with one bound to the door.

"One moment, my gentleman," said the turnkey, "I haven't come to let you out, but to admit the Governor, who is following me."

"The Governor!" said Coconnas, "and what has he come for?"

"To visit you."

"He does me great honour," answered Coconnas; "the Governor is welcome."

M. de Beaulieu now entered, and instantly checked the cordial smile with which Coconnas greeted him by that icy politeness which is peculiar to Governors of Fortresses, gaolers, and executioners.

"Have you any money, sir?" he inquired of the prisoner.

"I?" said Coconnas, "not a crown!"

"Any jewellery?"

"I have a ring."

"Will you allow me to search you?"

"'Sdeath!" said Coconnas, reddening with anger, "it's lucky for you that you are in prison and I also."

"Everything must be borne in the King's service."

"Why," said the Piedmontese, "are the honest folk, then, who plunder people on the Pont-Neuf, in the service of the King, like yourself? 'Sdeath! sir, I have been doing them great injustice, for hitherto I have taken them for thieves."

"Sir, I salute you," said Beaulieu. "Turnkey, lock the gentleman up."

The Governor went off, taking with him the ring, a very fine emerald, which the Duchesse de Nevers had given Coconnas to remind him of the colour of her eyes.

"Now for the other man," said he.

They crossed an empty chamber, and the game with the three doors, the six locks, and the nine bolts, began all over again.

The last of the doors was opened, and a sigh was the first sound which struck the visitors.

The aspect of this room was even more gloomy than that of the one which M. de Beaulieu had just quitted. Four long narrow loopholes, diminishing in width towards the exterior, scantily illuminated this gloomy lodging. Moreover, iron bars, crossed so cunningly that the view was always intercepted by a dark line, prevented the prisoner from ever seeing the sky through these loopholes.

Vaulting-ribs ran from each corner of the room, meeting at the centre of the ceiling, where they expanded into a carved boss.

La Mole was sitting in one of the corners, and seemed not to notice the presence of his visitors. The Governor paused on the threshold, and looked for a moment at the prisoner, who remained motionless, with his head buried in his hands.

"Good evening, Monsieur de La Mole," said Beaulieu.

The young man slowly raised his head.

"Good evening, sir," said he.

"I have come to search you," continued the Governor.

"It is needless," said La Mole, "I will hand you over all I have."

"What have you?"

"About three hundred crowns, and these jewels and rings."

"Give them me, sir," said the Governor.

"Here they are."

La Mole emptied his pockets, stripped his fingers, and unfastened the clasp from his cap.

"Have you nothing more?"

"Nothing that I know of."

"What is on that silk cord fastened round your neck?" asked the Governor.

"It is not a jewel, sir, but a relic."

"Give it me."

"What! you demand? . . ."

"My orders are to leave you only your garments, and a relic is not a garment."

La Mole made a movement of anger, which, in contrast with the sorrowful and dignified calmness of his previous demeanour, was even more dismaying to these men, accustomed as they were to the display of violent emotion.

He recovered himself, however, almost immediately.

"Very well, sir," said he, "I will show you the thing you ask me for."

Then, turning round as if to get nearer to the light, he unfastened the pretended relic, which was no other than a medallion containing a portrait, which he extracted from its frame and pressed to his lips. But after kissing it several times, he pretended to drop it, and stamping on it violently with the heel of his boot, crushed it into a thousand fragments.

"Sir! . . ." said the Governor.

And he stooped down to see if he could not rescue from destruction the unknown object which La Mole had tried to conceal from him, but the miniature was literally crushed to powder.

"The King demanded this jewel," said La Mole, "but he had no right to the

portrait contained in it. Here is the medallion; you can take it now."

"Sir," said Beaulieu, "I shall complain to the King of your conduct."

And without a word of farewell to the prisoner, he retired in such dudgeon that he allowed the turnkey to lock the doors without superintending the performance.

The gaoler took a few steps, then, seeing that M. de Beaulieu was already beginning to descend the stairs, he turned back, and observed:

"Upon my word, sir, it was a good thing I asked you to give me at once the hundred crowns, in return for which I am to allow you to speak to your companion, otherwise the Governor would have taken them with the other three hundred, and my conscience would not have allowed me to break the rules for you; but I have been paid in advance, I have promised you should see your comrade . . . well . . . an honest man must be as good as his word . . . Only, if possible, for your own sakes as much as for mine, don't discuss political matters."

La Mole left his room, and found himself face to face with Coconnas, who was pacing the floor of the chamber which separated their cells.

The two friends threw themselves into each other's arms.

The turnkey pretended to be wiping his eyes, and went out to watch that the prisoners should not be surprised, or rather, that he himself should not be surprised.

"Ah! here you are," said Coconnas; "well, has that wretched Governor paid you his visit?"

"Yes, and you also, I presume"

"Did he take everything from you?"

"As he did from you, too."

"Oh! I had not much; a ring of Henriette's, that was all."

"And in ready money?"

"I had already given all I possessed to our worthy gaoler in order to procure us this interview."

"Ha!" said La Mole, "it seems that he receives with both hands."

"You paid him also, then?"

"I gave him a hundred crowns"

"So much the better that our turnkey should be a mercenary wretch."

"Quite so; he will do anything we like for money, and that we shall not lack, it is to be hoped."

"Now, then, do you understand what has happened to us?"

"Perfectly . . . we have been betrayed."

"By that execrable creature, the Duc d'Alençon. I had good cause for wanting to wring his neck."

"And do you think our predicament is serious?"

"I am afraid so."

"Then we have to fear . . . the question?"

"I will not conceal from you that the idea has already occurred to me."

"What shall you say, in case it comes to that?"

"What shall *you*?"

"I shall refuse to speak," replied La Mole, with a feverish redness in his cheeks.

"You will refuse to speak?"

"Yes, if my courage holds out."

"Well, for my part," said Coconnas, "if they submit me to this ignominy, I warrant you I shall say a good many things."

"But what things?" asked La Mole, quickly.

"Oh! don't be alarmed, things that will prevent M. d'Alençon from sleeping for some time."

La Mole was about to reply, when the gaoler, who no doubt had heard some noise or other, rushed in, and, pushing each of our two friends into his own room, locked the door upon them.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MANIKIN OF WAX

CHARLES had been confined to his bed for a week by debility, interrupted by violent attacks resembling epileptic fits. During these attacks, he now and again uttered shrieks which were listened to with alarm by the guards on duty in his ante-chamber, and the echoes of which reverberated through the inmost chambers of the old Louvre, which had so often of late resounded with ominous and sinister noises. Then, the crisis past, exhausted and dull-eyed, the King would sink back into his nurse's arms, a silent prey to the horrors of fear and suspicion combined.

To describe the evil thoughts which stirred the breasts of Catherine de'

Medici, and the Duc d'Alençon—uncommunicated to each other, for mother and son avoided rather than sought one another's company—to describe these thoughts would be like attempting to depict the hideous writhings of a brood of vipers in their nest.

Henri had been imprisoned, and, by the King's own order, permission to see him had been refused to everybody, including even Marguerite. His disgrace was complete in the eyes of all. Catherine and D'Alençon breathed more freely, thinking his cause now hopeless, and Henri ate and drank with less suspicion, hoping himself forgotten.

No one at the Court suspected the cause of the King's illness. Master Ambroise Paré and his colleague Mazille had detected internal inflammation, mistaking the result for the cause, and that was all. They had, consequently, prescribed a soothing diet which could not fail to aid the effect of the special beverage ordered by René, which was administered to Charles three times a day by his nurse, and which constituted his chief nourishment.

Meantime, La Mole and Coconnas were at Vincennes, under the strictest guard. Marguerite and Madame de Nevers had made numerous attempts to see them, or at least to communicate with them by letter, but without success.

Amid the perpetual alternations of feeling worse or better, experienced by Charles, there came a morning when, finding himself somewhat better, he wished to have in the whole Court, which had continued to assemble as usual every morning at the hour for rising, notwithstanding the fact that the King would not get up.

The doors were accordingly thrown open, and the courtiers were able to observe, from the pallor of his cheeks, the yellow tint of his forehead, and the feverish gleam which shone in his hollow eyes encircled with dark rings, what terrible ravages had been effected by the mysterious disease with which the young King had been seized.

The Royal chamber was presently filled with inquisitive and interested courtiers. Catherine, D'Alençon, and Marguerite were informed that the King was receiving. All three entered at short intervals, Catherine calm, D'Alençon smiling, Marguerite dejected.

Catherine seated herself at her son's bedside without noticing the look with which he had greeted her approach. M. d'Alençon stood at the foot of the bed. Marguerite leaned against a table, and was unable to restrain a sigh and a tear at sight of her brother's sunken eyes and emaciated features.

Charles, whom nothing escaped, heard the sigh and observed the tear, and signed to Marguerite with an almost imperceptible movement of his head.

This sign, almost imperceptible as it was, brightened the face of the poor Queen of Navarre, with whom Henri had had no time to exchange a word, nay, had perhaps not even wished to do so.

Marguerite feared for her husband, she trembled for her lover. For herself she had no fear, since she knew La Mole well enough to feel certain that she could rely on his silence.

"Well, dear son," said Catherine, "how do you feel?"

"Better, mother, better."

"And what do your doctors say?"

"My doctors? ah! they are clever fellows, mother," said Charles, with a burst of laughter, "and I confess it gives me great pleasure to hear them discussing my malady. Give me something to drink, nurse."

The nurse brought Charles a cup of his usual beverage.

"And what are they making you take, my son?"

"Oh! Madame, who knows anything of what their preparations contain?" replied the King, swallowing the draught eagerly.

"What my brother wants," said François, "is to be able to get up and go out into the sunshine; the chase, of which he is so fond, would soon set him up."

"Yes," said Charles, with a smile, the meaning of which it was impossible for the Duke to fathom, "the last one, however, didn't do me much good."

Charles had spoken these words in so marked a manner, that the conversation, in which the courtiers had not taken the slightest part, came to a stand-still. The King now gave a slight nod of the head; the courtiers gathered that the reception was over, and withdrew one after another.

D'Alençon made a movement as if to approach his brother, but some inward feeling restrained him. He bowed and withdrew.

Marguerite seized the emaciated hand which the King extended to her and kissed it, then she in her turn retired.

"Good Margot!" murmured Charles.

Catherine only now remained, still keeping her place by the bedside. Charles, finding himself left alone with his mother, shrank to the other side of the bed with the same feeling of terror with which one recoils before a snake. The information afforded him by the confession of René, followed by the results of his own silent meditation, had not left him the satisfaction of even entertaining a doubt as to her guilt.

He knew perfectly well to whom and to what his death was to be attributed. Accordingly, when Catherine bent over the bed and extended towards her son a hand as cold as was her glance, Charles shuddered with apprehension and repugnance.

"You are remaining, Madame?" said he.

"Yes, my son," replied Catherine; "I have something of importance to say to you."

"Speak, Madame," said Charles, shrinking back once more.

"Sire," said the Queen, "I heard you declare just now that your doctors were clever men . . ."

"And I affirm it again, Madame."

"But what have they done since you were taken ill?"

"Ah! true . . . but if you had only heard what they said . . . in truth, Madame, one would wish to be ill if only to hear such learned dissertations."

"Well, my son, would you like *me* to tell you something?"

"Indeed! tell me, mother."

"Well, I have a suspicion that all these great doctors know nothing at all about your malady."

"Really, Madame!"

"That they see the result, perhaps, but are ignorant of the cause."

"It is possible," said Charles, not understanding what his mother was aiming at.

"So that they are treating the symptoms instead of going to the root of the mischief."

"Upon my soul!" replied Charles in astonishment, "I believe you are right, mother."

"Well, my son," said Catherine, "as it is injurious to my Court and to the welfare of the State that you should be ill so long, inasmuch as popular feeling might be prejudicially affected, I have

assembled all the most learned professors."

"Of the medical science, Madame?"

"No, of a science more profound, one that is capable not only of reading the body, but the mind as well."

"Ah! that is a grand science, Madame, and one that with good reason is not imparted to kings! And have your researches had any result?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"The result which I hoped for; and I bring your Majesty the remedy which should cure both mind and body."

Charles shuddered. He imagined that his mother, finding that his life was unduly prolonged, had determined to complete, knowingly, that which she had begun unintentionally.

"And where is this remedy?" said Charles, raising himself on his elbow and looking at his mother.

"It is in the disease itself."

"Where is the disease, then?"

"Listen, my son," said Catherine: "have you ever heard say that the vengeance of secret foes can compass the death of its victim at a distance?"

"By the steel or by poison?" asked Charles, not losing sight for an instant of his mother's impassible countenance.

"No; by means far surer and more terrible," said Catherine.

"Explain yourself."

"My son," asked Catherine, "have you any belief in the practice of Art Magic?"

Charles repressed a smile of contempt and incredulity.

"A good deal," said he.

"Well," said Catherine eagerly, "from it proceed your sufferings. An enemy of your Majesty, who dared not attack you openly, has plotted against you in secret. He has directed against your Majesty's person a conspiracy all the more terrible since he had no accomplices, and that it was impossible to grasp the threads of this mysterious plot."

"Upon my soul, no!" said Charles, revolted by such a display of craft.

"Search well, my son," said Catherine, "recall to your mind certain projects for escape which will insure impunity to the murderer."

"The murderer!" cried Charles, "the murderer, do you say? Have they tried to kill me, then, mother?"

Catherine's eyes rolled hypocritically beneath their folded lids.

"Yes, my son; you perhaps doubt this, but I have gained the certainty of it."

"I never doubt anything you tell me," replied the King, with bitterness. "And how have they tried to kill me? I am curious to know."

"By Magic, my son."

"Explain yourself, Madame," said Charles, brought back again by disgust and distrust to his rôle of observer.

"If the conspirator whom I would indicate . . . and your Majesty knows in your own heart to whom I am alluding . . . having arranged all his batteries and feeling confident of success, had succeeded in escaping, nobody perhaps would have penetrated the cause of your Majesty's illness; but happily, Sire, your brother was watching over you."

"Which brother?" asked Charles.

"Your brother D'Alençon."

"Ah! yes, true; I always forget that I have a brother," murmured Charles, with a bitter laugh. "And you say then, Madame . . ."

"That he fortunately revealed to your Majesty the material side of this conspiracy. But while he, an inexperienced youth, sought but the traces of an ordinary plot and the proofs of a young man's escapade, I sought for the proofs of an act of far deeper importance, knowing the lengths to which the culprit was capable of going."

"But, mother, one would think that you are referring to the King of Navarre?" said Charles, anxious to see how far this Florentine dissimulation would proceed.

Catherine lowered her eyes hypocritically.

"I have had him arrested, I imagine, and taken to Vincennes on account of the escapade in question," continued the King; "can he even be more guilty than I suspect?"

"Do you feel a devouring fever?" asked Catherine.

"Yes, certainly, Madame," said Charles, with a frown.

"And a burning heat gnawing in your inside?"

"Yes, Madame," answered Charles, with increasing sternness.

"And shooting pains in your head, which penetrate to your brain like arrow-thrusts?"

"Yes, yes, Madame, I feel all this: you are indeed clever in describing my symptoms."

"Well, it is all quite simple," said Catherine; "look . . ."

And she drew from beneath her cloak an object which she handed to the King.

This was a manikin of yellow wax, about six inches high, and dressed in a robe adorned with gold stars, over which hung a Royal mantle, both moulded in wax, like the figure itself.

"Well!" said Charles, "what is this little image?"

"Look what it has on its head," said Catherine.

"A crown," replied Charles.

"And at its heart?"

"A needle."

"Well, sire, do you recognise yourself?"

"Myself?"

"Yes, Sire, in your crown and mantle."

"And who made this figure, then?" said Charles, beginning to weary of the comedy; "the King of Navarre, no doubt?"

"No, Sire."

"No! . . . then I do not understand you."

"I say 'no,'" replied Catherine, "because your Majesty might be particular as to the exact fact. I should have said 'yes,' had your Majesty put the question in a different form."

Charles did not answer. He was endeavouring to fathom the thoughts of this inscrutable mind which baffled him each time when he thought himself about to see clearly into its depths.

"Sire," continued Catherine, "this figure was found, through the exertions of your Procureur-Général Laguesle, in the lodgings of the man who, on the day of the fowling-chase, was holding a horse in readiness for the King of Navarre."

"M. de La Mole?" said Charles.

"Yes, Sire; and look once more, if you please, at this steel needle piercing the heart, and see what letter is written on the label attached to it."

"I see an 'M,'" said Charles.

"That is to say, *Mort* (Death); it is the magic formula, Sire. The inventor of the charm writes his wish thus on the very wound which he inflicts. Had he wished to strike his victim with madness, as the Duc de Bretagne did in the case of King Charles VI., he would have driven the needle into the head, and have put an 'F,' *Folie* (Madness), instead of an 'M.'"

"Then in your opinion, Madame, this

man who aims at my life is M. de La Mole ? ”

“ Yes, in the sense that the dagger may be said to aim at the heart ; yes, but behind the dagger is the arm that directs it.”

“ And that is the whole cause of my illness, and the illness will cease on the day the charm is destroyed ? But how are we to compass that ? ” asked Charles. “ I daresay *you* know, mother, since you have interested yourself all your life in the science of magic ; whereas *I*, on the contrary, am quite ignorant on the subject.”

“ The death of the inventor destroys the charm, that is all ; on the day that the charm is destroyed, the mischief will cease,” said Catherine.

“ Really ! ” said Charles, with an air of astonishment.

“ What ! Don’t you know that ? ”

“ By’r Lady ! I am no sorcerer,” said the King.

“ Well ! ” said Catherine, “ now you are convinced, are you not ? ”

“ Certainly.”

“ Your conviction will dispel your anxiety ? ”

“ Completely so.”

“ You don’t say that merely to please me ? ”

“ No, mother ; I say it in all sincerity.”

Catherine’s countenance cleared.

“ God be praised ! ” she cried, as though she believed in God.

“ Yes, God be praised ! ” repeated Charles, ironically. “ I now know, like yourself, to whom to attribute my present condition, and consequently whom to punish.”

“ And we will punish . . . ”

“ M. de La Mole : didn’t you say he was the culprit ? ”

“ I said he was the tool.”

“ Well ! ” said Charles, “ M. de La Mole in the first place ; that is of chief importance. . . These constant attacks to which I am subject, may give rise to dangerous suspicions : it is urgent that light should be thrown upon the question and the truth made plain.”

“ Then, M. de La Mole . . . ? ”

“ Will suit me capitally by way of culprit ; I accept him accordingly. Let us begin with him first ; and, if he has an accomplice, he will disclose his name.

“ Yes,” murmured Catherine ; “ if he does not speak, we will make him : we have infallible means for doing that.”

Then, in a louder tone, as she rose :

“ You give permission, then, Sire, for the examination to commence ? ”

“ I desire it to do so, Madame, and the sooner the better.”

Catherine pressed her son’s hand, without understanding why it trembled with such nervous agitation, and went out without hearing the King’s sardonic laugh or the low and terrible imprecation which succeeded it.

The King asked himself whether it was not dangerous thus to give a free rein to this woman, who, in a few hours, would do so much mischief that it would be impossible to remedy it.

At this moment, as he watched the curtain fall behind Catherine, he heard a slight rustling, and on turning round he saw Marguerite lifting the curtain in front of the passage leading to his Nurse’s room.

The paleness of her cheeks, the wild look in her eyes, and the heaving of her bosom, betokened the most violent emotion.

“ Oh ! Sire, Sire,” she cried, rushing towards her brother’s bed, “ you know quite well that she is telling lies.”

“ She, who ? ” asked Charles.

“ Listen, Charles ; true, it is a terrible thing to accuse one’s mother ; but I suspected that she was remaining with you in order to pursue them still further. But, on my life, on your life, on the souls of both of us, I tell you that she lies.”

“ To pursue them ! . . . whom is she pursuing ? ”

Both of them spoke instinctively in low tones ; you would have thought they feared to hear their own voices.

“ Henri, in the first place, your Henriot who loves you, who is more devoted to you than anybody is.”

“ You think so, Margot ? ” said Charles.

“ Oh ! Sire, I am certain of it.”

“ Well, so am I,” said Charles.

“ Then, if you are sure of it, brother,” said Marguerite, in astonishment, “ why have you had him arrested and taken to Vincennes ? ”

“ Because he asked me himself to do so.”

“ He asked you to do so, Sire ? . . . ”

“ Yes, he has some queer notions, has Henri. Perhaps he is mistaken, perhaps he is right ; but anyhow, one of his notions is that he is in greater safety under my displeasure than in my favour, at a distance from me than near me, at Vincennes than at the Louvre.”

"Ah! I understand," said Marguerite, "and is he, then, in safety?"

"By'r Lady! as safe as a man can be for whom Beaulieu answers to me with his head."

"Oh! thank you, brother, I am reassured as regards Henri. But . . ."

"But what?" asked Charles.

"But there is another person, Sire, in whom I am perhaps wrong to be interested, and yet I *am* interested in him."

"And who is that person?"

"Spare me, Sire . . . I hardly dare name him to my brother; I dare not name him to my King."

"M. de La Mole, is it not?" said Charles.

"Alas!" said Marguerite, "you wanted to kill him once before, Sire, and it was only by a miracle that he escaped your Royal vengeance."

"And that, Marguerite, when he was guilty of only one crime; but now that he has committed two . . ."

"Sire, he is not guilty of the second."

"But," said Charles, "didn't you hear what our good mother said, poor Margot?"

"I have already told you, Charles, that she lies," replied Marguerite, lowering her voice.

"Perhaps you are not aware that a wax figure has been seized in M. de La Mole's room?"

"Yes, brother; I know it."

"And that this figure is pierced to the heart by a needle, to which is attached a little banner with an 'M' upon it?"

"I know that also."

"That the figure has a Royal mantle over its shoulders and a Royal crown on its head?"

"I know all that."

"Well! what have you to say?"

"I have to say that this little figure with a Royal crown and mantle represents a woman, and not a man at all."

"Bah!" said Charles; "and the needle piercing its heart?"

"Was a charm to gain this woman's love, and not a malevolent spell to compass a man's death."

"But the letter 'M'?"

"It does not stand for '*mort*,' as the Queen-Mother declares."

"What, then, does it stand for," asked Charles.

"It stands for . . . the name of the woman whom M. de La Mole loved."

"And that woman's name?"

"Her name is *Marguerite*, brother," said the Queen of Navarre, falling on her knees beside the King's bed, taking his hand in both her own, and pressing against it her face, bathed in tears.

"Silence, sister!" said Charles, with a frown, and glancing keenly round the apartment; "hush, hush! as you have overheard others, so you may be overheard in your turn."

"Oh! what matters it!" said Marguerite, raising her head; "what matters it though everyone were here to listen! Before the whole world, I would declare that it is infamous to misuse the love of a gentleman in order to smirch his reputation by suspecting him of murder."

"Suppose I were to tell you, Margot, that I know the true facts of the case as well as you do?"

"Oh! brother!"

"Suppose I were to tell you that M. de La Mole is innocent?"

"You know he is?"

"Suppose I were to tell you that I know the real criminal?"

"The real criminal!" cried Marguerite; "why, has a crime, then, been committed?"

"Yes, voluntarily or otherwise, a crime has been committed."

"Against you?"

"Against me."

"Impossible."

"Impossible? . . . Look at me, Margot."

The Queen looked at her brother, and shuddered to see him so pale.

"Margot, I have not three months to live."

"You, my brother! you, my Charles!" she cried.

"Margot, I have been poisoned."

Marguerite uttered a shriek.

"But never say a word," said Charles, "it must be believed that my death is caused by witchcraft."

"And you know the guilty person?"

"I do."

"You have said that it is not La Mole?"

"No, it is not he."

"Neither is it Henri, certainly . . . Great God! can it be . . .?"

"Who?"

"My brother . . . D'Alençon?" murmured Marguerite.

"Perhaps."

"Or . . . or . . ." Marguerite hushed her voice, as though terrified at the bare

thought of what she was about to say ;
 " or . . . our mother ? "

Charles was silent.

Marguerite looked at him, read in his glance all that she sought, and fell, still kneeling, backwards against a chair.

" Oh ! my God ! my God ! it is impossible ! " she murmured.

" Impossible ! " said Charles, with a shrill laugh, " it is a pity René is not here ; he would tell you the whole story."

" René ? "

" Yes, he would tell you, for instance, that a woman to whom he dared refuse nothing, went to ask him for a book on hunting that was hidden away in his library ; that a subtle poison was poured over each page of this book ; that this poisoned volume, intended for someone—I know not for whom—fell by a freak of fortune, or as a punishment from heaven, into the hands of a different person from the one for whom it was intended. But, in the absence of René, if you like to see the book, it is in my closet yonder, and you will see, by what is written on it in the Florentine's own hand, that this book, containing on its leaves poison enough to kill twenty persons more, was given into the hands of his fellow country-woman."

" Silence, Charles, in your turn, silence ! " said Marguerite.

" Now you see clearly that my death must be believed to be due to witchcraft."

" But it is iniquitous ; it is horrible ! spare him, spare him ! you know quite well that he is innocent."

" Yes, I know it ; but he must be believed to be guilty. You must therefore put up with the death of your lover ; it is a small thing to do for the preservation of the honour of the House of France. I am enduring death that the secret may die with me."

Marguerite bowed her head, realising that nothing could be done, so far as the King was concerned, to save La Mole, and went away in tears, convinced that her sole hope lay in her own resources.

Meanwhile, as Charles had anticipated, Catherine had not lost a minute, but had written a letter to the Procureur-Général Laguesle, every syllable of which has been preserved by history, and which throws a lurid light upon the whole affair :

" *Monsieur le Procureur*,—I have been told this evening as a certain fact that La Mole has committed sacrilege. In his

lodgings in Paris have been discovered a number of compromising things, such as books and papers. I beg you to summon the Chief President, and investigate with all despatch the matter of the waxen figure with the needle in its heart, which represents an attempt upon the life of the King.

CATHERINE."

CHAPTER XXV

UNSEEN BUCKLERS

ON the morrow of the day on which Catherine had written the above letter, the Governor entered the cell of Coconnas, accompanied by a most imposing retinue, consisting of four persons in black robes, together with two halberdiers. Coconnas was bidden to descend to a hall where the Procureur Laguesle and two Judges were waiting to examine him in accordance with Catherine's instructions.

During the week that he had spent in prison, Coconnas had had ample time for reflection, and without taking into account that La Mole and he, in the brief daily meeting granted them, to their surprise, by their gaoler—a boon in all probability not due to his philanthropy alone—without, we say, taking into account that they had come to an understanding as to the course they were to pursue, namely, to give an absolute denial to everything, Coconnas now persuaded himself that by dint of a little dexterity the affair would be made to end happily, since La Mole and he had not to meet any charge more serious than had to be met by the others concerned. Henri and Marguerite had made no attempt to escape ; he and La Mole, therefore, could hardly be compromised in an affair where the chief culprits were allowed to go free. Coconnas was in ignorance that Henri was an inmate of the same prison as himself, while the indulgence of his gaoler fully convinced him that over his head hovered a protection, which he termed his *unseen bucklers* of defence.

Investigations hitherto had been directed towards the designs of the King of Navarre, his projects of escaping, and the part which the two friends were to take

in this escape. To all the questions put to him Coconnas had replied in a vague and artful fashion; he was prepared to answer once more in the same style, and had arranged beforehand all his little repartees, when, suddenly, he perceived that the scope of the inquiry had taken a fresh turn.

The question now was in regard to one or more visits paid to René, and one or more wax figures made at La Mole's instigation.

Fully prepared as he was, Coconnas imagined that the seriousness of the charges was now greatly diminished, since it was no longer a question of treason against a King, but merely of making an image of a Queen, and that statue only six or eight inches at the most in height.

He replied, then, with much amusement that he and his friend had left off playing with dolls for a long time, and was pleased to notice that on several occasions his answers were privileged to make the Judges laugh.

The verse: "*I have laughed, so behold me disarm'd,*" had not yet been composed, but the sentiment had often been expressed in prose; and Coconnas fancied that, because they had smiled, he had half-disarmed his Judges of their hostility.

Accordingly, when his examination was concluded, he went up again to his room, singing so loudly that La Mole, for whose benefit all this noise was intended, could not help drawing from it inferences of a most consoling kind.

La Mole was summoned downstairs in his turn. Like Coconnas, he was astonished to find the former charge dropped, and the inquiry now pursuing a fresh course.

Questioned as to his visits to René, he answered that he had been to the Florentine's house on one occasion only. Asked whether, on this occasion, he had not ordered the making of a wax figure, he replied that René had showed him this figure already made. Asked whether this figure did not represent a man, he replied that it represented a woman. Asked whether the object of the charm was not to procure the death of this man, he replied that its object was to procure the affection of this woman.

These questions were varied in a hundred different ways, but to all of them, whatever the precise form in which they

were put, La Mole always made the same replies.

The Judges were looking at one another undecidedly, not knowing what to say or do in the face of such artlessness, when a note brought to the Procureur-Général solved the difficulty.

It contained these words:

"If the accused denies the charge, proceed to the torture.—C."

The Judge put the note into his pocket, smiled at La Mole, and politely dismissed him. La Mole returned to his cell almost as completely reassured, if not so cheerful, as Coconnas.

"I think all is going very well," said he.

An hour later he heard the sound of footsteps, and saw a note being slipped under his door, but not the hand that placed it there. He picked it up, thinking that the message had, in all probability, been delivered by the turnkey.

On seeing this note, his heart conceived a hope as great as would have been his disappointment if that hope had proved unfounded; this hope was that the note had come from Marguerite, of whom he had received no tidings since his imprisonment. He grasped it with trembling hands. The handwriting made him almost die of joy.

"Courage!" said the note, "I am watching."

"Ah! if she is watching," cried La Mole, as he covered with kisses the paper which so dear a hand had touched, "if she is watching, I am saved! . . ."

It is necessary, in order that La Mole may understand this note, and may put the same faith as Coconnas in what the Piedmontese termed his *unseen bucklers*, that we should conduct the reader once more to that little house, and to that room where so many scenes of intoxicating happiness, so many perfumes whose scent had scarce yet evaporated, so many sweet memories which had since turned to painful ones, were breaking the heart of a woman who had thrown herself back upon the velvet cushions in an attitude of despair.

"To be a Queen, to be young, strong, rich, beautiful, and yet to suffer as I am suffering!" she cried; "oh! it is too much!"

Then, in her agitation, she rose and walked up and down, stopped suddenly,

rested her burning forehead against the cool marble, rose again with her pale face bathed in tears, wrung her hands with exclamations of grief, and sank despondently into a chair.

Suddenly, the hangings which separated the apartment in the Rue Cloche-Percée from the apartment in the Rue Tizon were raised; the rustle of silken skirts was heard on the wooden floor, and the Duchesse de Nevers appeared.

"Oh! it is you!" cried Marguerite; "how impatiently I have been waiting for you! Well! what news?"

"Bad news, my poor friend. Catherine herself is pushing the inquiry, and is at Vincennes at this very moment."

"And René?"

"He has been arrested."

"Before you were able to speak to him?"

"Yes."

"And our prisoners?"

"I have news of them."

"From the turnkey?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Well! they communicate with each other every day. The day before yesterday they were searched. La Mole crushed your portrait in pieces rather than hand it over."

"That dear La Mole!"

"Hannibal laughed in the face of his inquisitors."

"Good Hannibal! But what next?"

"They were examined this morning as to the King's meditated escape, and the scheme of rebellion in Navarre, and they refused to speak."

"Oh! I was quite sure they would hold their tongues; but alas! their silence may involve their death no less than their speaking out would do."

"Yes, but *we* shall save them."

"Have you thought over our enterprise, then?"

"I have thought of nothing else since yesterday."

"Well?"

"I have just arranged with Beaulieu. Ah! my dear Queen, such a difficult man to deal with, and so grasping! It will cost a man's life and three hundred thousand crowns into the bargain."

"You call him grasping and hard to deal with. . . . and yet he only asks a man's life and three hundred thousand crowns. . . . Why, it is a mere nothing!"

"A mere nothing . . . three hundred

thousand crowns! . . . Why, all your jewels and mine as well will not be enough."

"Oh! no matter: the King of Navarre will pay, the Duc d'Alençon will pay, my brother Charles will pay, or if not . . ."

"Come, you are talking like a mad-woman: I have got the three hundred thousand crowns."

"You?"

"Yes, I."

"And how did you procure them?"

"Ah! that's just it!"

"Is it a secret?"

"From everybody except yourself."

"Good heavens!" said Marguerite, smiling between her tears, "did you steal them?"

"You shall judge."

"Come, tell me."

"You remember that horrible Nantouillet?"

"The wealthy usurer?"

"Yes, if you like."

"Well?"

"Well! anyhow, one day when he saw a certain fair-haired woman passing by, with emerald eyes, and her hair done in the style which is so becoming to her, fastened with three rubies, one in the middle of the forehead and the other two at her temples, this wealthy usurer, not knowing that she was a Duchess, called out:—

"In return for three kisses where those three rubies are, I will produce three diamonds each worth a hundred thousand crowns."

"Well, Henriette?"

"Well, my dear, the diamonds have been produced and have been sold."

"Oh! Henriette!" murmured Marguerite.

"Ah! but, you see, I *love* Hannibal!" cried the Duchess, with a shamelessness at once natural and sublime, characteristic both of the period and of the woman who spoke.

"That is true," said Marguerite, smiling and blushing at the same time, "you love him well, too well, indeed."

She pressed Henriette's hand, notwithstanding.

"So, thanks to our three diamonds," continued Henriette, "the three hundred thousand crowns and the man are ready."

"The man! what man?"

"The man to be killed; you forget that we have to kill a man."

"And have you found the man you wanted?"

"Just the very man."

"At the same price?" asked Marguerite, with a smile.

"At the same price! why, I could have found a thousand of them. No, no, I got one quite easily for five hundred crowns."

"A man willing to be killed for five hundred crowns?"

"What would you have? a man must live."

"My dear friend, I don't understand you. Come, speak plainly; our present situation allows no time for guessing riddles."

"Well, then, listen: the gaoler who has charge of La Mole and Coconnas is an old soldier who knows what wounds are: he is very willing to help our friends to escape, but he doesn't want to lose his place. A carefully planted blow of a dagger will meet the difficulty; we shall reward him and the State will give him compensation. In this way the worthy man will receive with both hands, and will repeat the fable of the pelican."

"But," said Marguerite, "a blow from a dagger . . ."

"Make your mind easy, it is Hannibal who will give it."

"As a matter of fact," said Marguerite, with a laugh, "he has wounded La Mole three times with sword or dagger, and La Mole is not dead; so your man has good reason to be confident."

"What a tiresome creature you are! you deserve that I should tell you nothing more."

"Oh! no, no, on the contrary; tell me the rest, I beg of you. How are we going to save them?"

"Well, here is the plan: the chapel is the only part of the castle into which women who are not prisoners are admitted. We shall be concealed behind the altar; beneath the altar-cloth will be two daggers. The door of the sacristy will be opened beforehand; Coconnas strikes the gaoler, who falls and pretends to be dead; then we appear, and throw a cloak over the shoulders of each of our friends; we escape with them through the little door of the sacristy, and as we possess the countersign, we shall pass out without challenge."

"And when we have passed out?"

"Two horses will await them at the

gate; they will mount them, leave the Ile de France and reach Lorraine, from which they will return occasionally in disguise."

"Good, good! I breathe again," said Marguerite. "So we shall save them?"

"I would almost vouch for it."

"And soon?"

"Yes, in three or four days; Beaulieu will forewarn us."

"But if you are recognised in the neighbourhood of Vincennes, it might endanger our scheme."

"How do you think I shall be recognised? I shall go disguised as a Nun with a veil, thanks to which not even the tip of my nose will be visible."

"We cannot take too many precautions."

"I am quite aware of it, 'sdeath! as poor Hannibal would say."

"And did you enquire about the King of Navarre?"

"I took good care to do so."

"Well?"

"Well! it appears he was never so happy; he laughs, he sings, he lives well, and only asks one thing, namely, to be well guarded."

"He is quite right. And my mother?"

"I told you, she is pushing on the trial as hard as she can."

"Yes, but she has no suspicions in regard to you and me?"

"How could she suspect anything? All those who are in the secret have a motive for keeping it. Ah! I knew she had told the Judges in Paris to hold themselves in readiness."

"We must act quickly, Henriette. If our poor captives were transferred to another prison, all our work would have to be done over again."

"Make your mind easy; I am just as anxious as you to see them outside."

"Oh! yes, I know it, and thanks a hundred times for what you have done to attain that result."

"Adieu, Marguerite, adieu! I am off to the country again."

"And you are sure of Beaulieu?"

"I hope so."

"And the turnkey?"

"He has promised."

"The horses?"

"They will be the best to be found in the Duc de Nevers's stables."

"I adore you, Henriette." And Marguerite threw herself on her friend's neck;

after which the two women separated, promising to meet on the morrow and each succeeding day at the same place and at the same hour.

It was these two charming and devoted creatures whom Coconnas called with such good reason his *unseen bucklers*.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE JUDGES

"WELL! my worthy friend," said Coconnas to La Mole, when the two comrades met again at the close of the inquiry at which, for the first time, the question of the wax figure had been raised, "it seems to me that everything is going wonderfully well, and that we shall very soon be given up by the Judges—a totally different thing from being given up by the doctors. When the doctor gives up the patient, it is because he cannot save his life; while, on the contrary, when the judge gives up the accused person, it is because he has lost the hope of getting his head cut off."

"Yes," said La Mole, "and in the politeness shown to us and the facilities for intercourse granted by our turnkey, I seem to recognise the influence of our fair and illustrious friends; but I do not recognise that of M. de Beaulieu, or, at least, what I had been told to expect from him."

"I recognise it very well," said Coconnas; "only it will be an expensive business; but, pooh! one of them is a princess, and the other a queen; they are both rich, and will never have another opportunity of laying out their money to such good advantage. Now, let us go through our lesson carefully: we are taken to the chapel, where we are left under the guard of our turnkey; we each find a dagger at the place specified; I drive a hole through the body of our guide . . ."

"Oh! not through his body; you would be robbing him of his five hundred crowns. You must make it in his arm."

"Why! to wound him in the arm would be the ruin of the poor fellow! it would be quite obvious that the matter had been arranged between him and me.

No, no; in his right side, passing skilfully along the ribs; that would be a likely sort of wound to inflict, and at the same time a harmless one."

"Very well, so much for that; in the next place . . ."

"In the next place, you barricade the great door with benches, while our two Princesses slip from behind the altar where they are concealed, and Henriette opens the small door. Upon my soul! I love Henriette to-day; she must have been guilty of some infidelity towards me, to make me so keen again about her."

"And then," said La Mole, in tones that vibrated like music, "and then we make for the woods. A sweet kiss bestowed on each of us will make us strong and cheerful. Do you see us, Hannibal, bending over our swift steeds, and with a tender anxiety in our hearts? Oh! what a good thing is fear! Fear in the open air, when you have your trusty sword at your side, when you shout hurrah! to your flying courser, as you ply him with the spur."

"Yes," said Coconnas, "but fear when you are enclosed by four walls, what do you say of *that*, La Mole? I can speak about it, for I have experienced something of the sort, when that pale-faced Beaulieu entered my room the first time, and the partisans gleamed in the darkness behind him, and the sinister clash of steel resounded. I swear to you I thought at once of the Duc d'Alençon, and expected to see his ugly face appear between the ugly heads of two halberdiers. I was mistaken, and that was my only consolation; but it wasn't all over, and when night came, I dreamed of it."

"And so," said La Mole, pursuing his own pleasing thoughts, without following the flights of fancy in which his friend was indulging, "they have arranged everything, even the place of our retreat. We are going into Lorraine, dear friend. To tell the truth, I should have preferred Navarre; in Navarre, I should have been near her, but Lorraine is too far away. Nancy would do better; besides, in Nancy, we should be only eighty leagues from Paris. Do you know, Hannibal, one regret I shall carry away on leaving here?"

"My word, no . . . what is it? For my part, I confess I shall leave all my regrets behind me."

"Well! it is the not being able to take with us the worthy gaoler instead of . . ."

"But he wouldn't come," said Coconnas; "he would be giving up too much. Just think: five hundred crowns from us, compensation from the Government, promotion, very likely. What a merry life the fellow will lead, when I have killed him! . . . But what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing! Merely a thought which flashed across my mind."

"Not a cheerful one, apparently, for you look frightfully pale."

"I was asking myself why we should be taken to the chapel."

"Why, to receive the Sacrament," said Coconnas, "and a very proper time to do so, I think."

"But," said La Mole, "it is only those who are condemned to death or torture who are taken to the chapel."

"Oho!" said Coconnas, turning slightly pale in his turn, "this deserves consideration. Let us examine on the point the worthy man whom I am to rip up presently. Hi! turnkey, my friend!"

"Did you call, sir?" said the turnkey, who was keeping watch at the top of the staircase.

"Yes, come here."

"Here I am."

"It is arranged that we are to escape from the chapel, is it not?"

'Sh!" said the turnkey, looking round him in alarm.

"Make your mind easy, nobody is listening."

"Yes, sir, from the chapel."

"We shall be taken to the chapel then?"

"No doubt, that is the usual custom."

"The usual custom?"

"Yes, after every condemnation to death, it is the custom to allow the condemned person to pass the night in the chapel."

"Then you think we shall be condemned to death?"

"No doubt . . . why, you thought so yourselves."

"What! we thought so, too!" said La Mole.

"Certainly . . . if you didn't think so, you wouldn't have made all these arrangements for escape."

"Do you know there is a great deal of sense in what he says!" said Coconnas to La Mole.

"Yes . . . and now I know another thing for certain . . . that we are playing for great stakes, to all appearance."

"And what of *me*!" said the turnkey, "don't you think I stand to loose something? . . . If in a moment of excitement this gentleman should make a mistake in the direction! . . ."

"'Sdeath!" said Coconnas slowly, "I should be only too glad to be in your place and not to be exposed to any other hands than mine, or to any other weapon than the one which will touch you."

"Condemned to death!" faltered La Mole; "but it is impossible!"

"Impossible!" said the turnkey innocently, "and why?"

"'Sh!" said Coconnas, "I believe they are opening the door below there."

"You are right," said the turnkey quickly; "in with you, gentleman, in with you!"

"And when do you think sentence will be passed?" asked La Mole.

"To-morrow, or perhaps later. But make your minds easy, the persons concerned will have due warning."

"Then let us embrace and say our farewells to these walls."

The two friends threw themselves into each other's arms, and each entered his own room, La Mole sighing, and Coconnas singing.

Nothing fresh happened until seven in the evening. Night descended dark and rainy on the keep of Vincennes—just the sort of night for an escape. Supper was brought to Coconnas, and he ate it with his usual appetite, thinking all the time how pleasant it would have been to be drenched by the rain that was beating on the walls, and he was already preparing to fall asleep to the dull monotonous murmur of the wind, when it seemed to him that this wind, which filled him with a feeling of sadness which he had never experienced before he was in prison, was whistling under the doors in an unaccustomed fashion, and that the stove was roaring with a fiercer draught than usual. This phenomenon had always occurred whenever any of the rooms on the floor above, and especially when the room opposite to him, had been opened. Hannibal had always taken this sound as a signal that the goaler was about to visit him, since it indicated that he was coming out of La Mole's room.

This time, however, Coconnas remained with eyes and ears on the watch to no purpose. The minutes passed, but nobody came.

"This is very strange," said Coconnas, "La Mole's door has been opened, but mine has not. Did La Mole call? can he be ill? what is the meaning of it?" With prisoners, unexpected events sometimes arouse feelings of hope and joy, at other times they excite suspicion and uneasiness.

Half an hour, an hour, an hour and a half went by. Coconnas was beginning to fall asleep from sheer vexation, when the sound of the key turning in the lock made him start.

"Oho!" said he, "has the hour for our departure come already, and are we to be taken to the chapel without having been sentenced? 'Sdeath! it would be a pleasure to escape on a night like this, it is as black as an oven—provided, of course, the horses are not blinded!"

He was preparing to question the turnkey cheerfully, when he saw the latter put his finger to his lips and roll his eyes in a meaning way. Behind the turnkey Coconnas heard other steps approaching, and perceived some shadowy forms.

Suddenly, amid the darkness, he distinguished two helmets upon which the smoky torch shed a gleam of yellow light.

"Oho!" asked Coconnas, in an undertone, "this has a sinister look about it; where are we going, now, I wonder."

The turnkey only replied by a sigh, which strongly resembled a groan.

"'Sdeath!" muttered Coconnas "it is always a case of extremes and no firm ground: either we plunge in a hundred feet of water or we soar over the clouds; there seems to be no middle course. Here, where are we going?"

"Follow the halberdiers, sir," said a voice from the accent of which Coconnas gathered that the soldiers of whom he had caught a glimpse were accompanied by an Usher of some description.

"And M. de La Mole," asked Coconnas, "where is he? what has become of him?"

"Follow the halberdiers, sir," repeated the same voice with the same guttural accent.

There was nothing for it but to obey. Coconnas stepped out of his room and saw, in a black robe, the man whose voice had sounded to him so unpleasant. This was a little hunch-back, who presumably had become a gentleman of the long robe in order to conceal the fact that

he was bandy-legged as well as hunch-backed. He descended the spiral staircase slowly. On reaching the first floor, the guards halted.

"We have come a good way down," muttered Coconnas, "but not far enough yet."

The door opened. Coconnas, who had the eyes of a lynx, and the scent of a bloodhound, at once winded the Judges, and saw outlined in the shadow, a bare-armed figure, at the sight of whom the perspiration broke out upon his forehead. None the less did Coconnas assume a smiling demeanour, leaning his head to the left, in accordance with the fashion in vogue at that period, and, hand on hip, marched into the hall.

A curtain was raised, and Coconnas saw the Judges and their clerks before him. La Mole was seated on a bench a few paces from the tribunal.

On arriving opposite his Judges, Coconnas halted, greeted La Mole with a nod of the head and a smile, and then waited for what was to follow.

"Your name, sir?" asked the President.

"Marc-Annibal de Coconnas," replied he with perfect grace, "Comte de Montpantier, Chenaux and other places; but I presume you are acquainted with my style and titles."

"Where were you born?"

"At Saint-Colomban, near Suze."

"And your age?"

"Twenty-seven years and three months."

"Good," said the President.

"That appears to please him," murmured Coconnas.

"Now," said the President, after a short silence, which gave the clerks time to write down the answers of the accused, "what was your object in leaving the service of M. d'Alençon?"

"To join my friend M. de La Mole, whom I see there, and who had already quitted the Duke's service some days before I did."

"What were you doing at the fowling party at the moment when you were arrested?"

"Why . . . I was fowling," replied Coconnas.

"The King also was present at this sport, and it was there that he felt the first attacks of the illness from which he is now suffering."

"As to that, I was not near the King,

so I cannot say. I did not even know his Majesty had been attacked by any illness."

The Judges looked at one another with a smile of incredulity.

"Oh! you were ignorant of that fact?" said the President.

"Yes, sir, and I am sorry to hear it. Although the King of France is not my Sovereign, I feel much sympathy for him."

"Really?"

"Yes, upon my honour! I have not the same feeling for his brother, the Duc d'Alençon. The latter, I confess . . ."

"We are not talking at present, sir, of the Duc d'Alençon, but of his Majesty."

"Well, I have already told you that I am his very humble servant," replied Coconnas with a swagger of inimitable insolence.

"If you are really his servant, as you assert, sir, you will tell us what you know about a certain image of magic properties?"

"Ah! good! we are getting back to the story of the image, it appears."

"Yes, sir, does that annoy you?"

"Not at all, on the contrary; I prefer it. Go on."

"Why was that figure at M. de La Mole's?"

"At M. de La Mole's? At René's, you mean."

"You acknowledge that it exists then?"

"Yes, certainly, if you show it to me."

"Here it is. Is it the one which you know?"

"I know it quite well."

"Clerk," said the President, "make a note that the accused recognises the figure as the one that he saw at M. de La Mole's."

"No, no," said Coconnas, "let us have no mistake: 'as the one that I saw at René's.'"

"At René's, be it so! on what day?"

"On the only day that M. de La Mole and I were at his house."

"Then you admit that you went to René's with M. de La Mole?"

"Why, have I ever denied it?"

"Clerk, write down that the accused admits having gone to René's for the purpose of making conjurations."

"Here! hi! gently, gently, Monsieur le Président. Moderate your enthusiasm, I beg you; I didn't say a word of that."

"You deny that you went to René's to make conjurations?"

"Yes, I deny it; the conjuration was

made by accident, but without premeditation."

"But it took place."

"I can't deny that something in the nature of a charm was made."

"Clerk, write down that the accused admits that a charm against the King's life was made at René's."

"What, against the King's life! It is an infamous lie; no charm was ever made against the King's life."

"You hear, gentlemen," said La Mole.

"Silence!" said the President; then, turning to the clerk:—"Against the King's life," he continued.

"Were you concerned in it?"

"Why, no, no," said Coconnas: "besides, the figure does not represent a man, but a woman."

"Well, gentlemen, what did I tell you?" said La Mole.

"Monsieur de La Mole," said the President, "you can answer when you are questioned, but you must not interrupt the examination of others."

"So, you say that it represents a woman?"

"Certainly, I do."

"Then why has it a crown and a Royal mantle?"

"Zounds! sir," said Coconnas, "that is easily explained; because it is . . ."

La Mole rose and laid his finger on his lips.

"True," said Coconnas; "as if what I was about to say concerned these gentlemen!"

"You persist in saying that this is the image of a woman?"

"Yes, certainly."

"And you refuse to say who the woman is?"

"A woman of my own country," said La Mole, "whom I love, and whose love I seek."

"You are not being examined, Monsieur de La Mole," cried the President; "so unless you hold your tongue, you shall be gagged."

"Gagged!" said Coconnas; "what say you to that, gentlemen of the black robe? gag my friend! . . . a gentleman! for shame!"

"Bring in René," said the Procureur-Général Laguesle.

"Yes, bring in René, do; now we shall just see who is right, you three or we two."

René entered, looking pale and aged,

hardly recognisable by the two friends, bowed beneath the weight of the crime he was about to commit, even more than by those of which he had already been guilty.

"Master René," said the Judge, "do you recognise the two accused persons now present?"

"Yes, sir," answered René in tones which betrayed his emotion.

"Where have you ever seen them?"

"In several places, and, in particular, at my own house."

"How often have they been to your house?"

"Once only."

As René went on speaking, Coconnas' face brightened. La Mole's countenance, on the contrary, remained grave, as though he had a presentiment of what was coming.

"And on what occasion did they come to you?"

René seemed to hesitate for a moment.

"They came to order a wax figure," said he.

"Pardon me, Master René," said Coconnas, "you are making a slight mistake."

"Silence!" said the President; then, turning to René: "This little figure," he continued, "does it represent a man or a woman?"

"A man," answered René.

Coconnas sprang forward as though he had received an electric shock.

"A man!" said he.

"A man," repeated René, but in a voice so low that the answer hardly reached the President.

"And why has it a mantle on its shoulders, and a crown on its head?"

"Because the figure represents a King."

"Infamous liar!" cried the enraged Coconnas.

"Be silent, Coconnas, be silent," interrupted La Mole, "let the man speak; everyone has the right to destroy his own soul."

"But, 'sdeath and damnation! not the bodies of others."

"And what is the meaning of this steel needle stuck in the heart, with the letter 'M' written on a little banner?"

"The needle represents a sword or a dagger; the letter 'M' means *Mort*."

Coconnas made as though he would strangle René, but four guards held him back.

"Very well," said the Procureur Laguesle, "the information is sufficient for the Court; take the prisoners back to the waiting-rooms."

"But," cried Coconnas, "it is impossible to listen to such charges without protesting."

"Protest, sir, nobody is preventing you. Guards, did you hear?"

"The guards seized the two accused men, and removed them from the Hall, La Mole by one door, Coconnas by another.

Thereupon the Procureur beckoned to the man whom Coconnas had dimly seen through the darkness, and said to him:

"Don't go away, master, there will be work for you to-night."

"Which of them shall I begin with, sir?" asked the man, removing his cap respectfully.

"With that one," said the President, pointing to La Mole, who was seen just disappearing between the two guards; then, approaching René, who had remained standing tremblingly, until his turn came to be taken back to the *Châtelet*, where he had been confined:

"Reassure yourself, sir," said he, "the Queen-Mother and the King shall know that it is to you that they are indebted for learning the truth."

This promise, however, instead of restoring his courage, appeared to overwhelm René, who made no answer beyond heaving a profound sigh.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE TORTURE OF THE BOOT

IT was only when he had been conducted to his new cell, and the door had been closed upon him, that Coconnas, now left to himself, and no longer having his spirits sustained by the struggle with the Judges, and his anger against René, began the series of his sad reflections.

"It appears to me," he said to himself, "that things are going as badly as possible, and that it is quite time we went to the chapel. I mistrust condemnations to death, for there is not the slightest doubt but that is the business on which they are occupied at this moment. Above

all, I mistrust condemnations to death pronounced with closed doors in a fortress, and in the presence of faces so ugly as all those by which I was just now surrounded. They are seriously of a mind to cut off our heads, h'm ! h'm ! . . . I repeat what I said just now ; it is time we went to the chapel."

These words, uttered in an undertone, were followed by a silence—a silence broken by a hollow, stifled, and mournful cry that sounded hardly human ; it seemed to penetrate the thick walls, and ring on the iron bars of his window.

Coconnas shuddered involuntarily, though he was a man so brave that courage with him resembled the instinct of wild animals ; he remained motionless at the spot where he had heard that plaintive cry, doubting that such a sound could be uttered by a human being, and taking it to be the moaning of the wind in the trees, or one of those thousand mysterious noises of the night, to which the spirit-world around us gives utterance. Presently a second cry, more agonised than the first, reached his ears, and this time he not only clearly recognised the tones of a human being in pain, but even fancied he could distinguish the voice of La Mole.

At the sound of this voice, the Piedmontese forgot that he was confined by two doors, three gratings, and a wall twelve feet in thickness ; he dashed with all his weight against this wall, as though he would beat it down and fly to the aid of the victim, exclaiming : " He is being murdered ! " But he merely dashed against the wall, the existence of which he had forgotten, and stunned by the shock, fell against a stone seat, on to which he sank. That was all that came of his desperate effort.

" They have killed him ! " he groaned ; " it is abominable ! But one has no means of defence here . . . nothing, no weapon of any sort ! "

He felt about with his hands. " Ha ! this iron ring," he cried, " I will wrench it out, and woe betide the man who comes near me ! "

Coconnas rose, seized the iron ring, and with his first effort, shook it so violently that it was clear that his second attempt would dislodge it.

But on a sudden, the door opened, and the light of torches streamed into the cell.

" Come, sir," said the same guttural

voice, which he had already found so particularly unpleasant, and which did not seem to have gained any softness by having descended three floors lower ; " come, sir, the Court awaits you."

" Good," said Coconnas, releasing his grasp of the ring, " I am about to hear my sentence, am I not ? "

" Yes, sir."

" Ah ! then I breathe freely ; lead the way."

And he followed the Usher, who preceded him with measured step and holding his black wand.

Spite of the satisfaction which he had expressed as he left the cell, Coconnas, as he walked along, cast uneasy glances to right and left, before and behind him.

" Oho ! " he muttered, " I don't see my worthy friend, the turnkey ; I must confess that I miss his presence."

They entered the Hall which the Judges had just quitted, and where there now remained only one man, whom Coconnas recognised as the Procureur-Général. The latter had several times, during the course of the examination, acted as spokesman, and on each occasion with unconcealed animosity. This was due to the fact that it was he in particular who had been instructed by Catherine, sometimes by letter, sometimes verbally, to press on the trial.

A raised curtain allowed the further end of the hall to be seen, and although its extremities were plunged in darkness, those portions of it which were lighted presented so forbidding an appearance that Coconnas felt his legs give way beneath him, and exclaimed : " Oh, my God ! "

There was but too good reason for his cry of terror. The sight which met his eyes was, in truth, of an appalling nature. The part of the Hall which, during the examination, had been concealed by the curtain, which had now been raised, had all the appearance of a chamber in hell.

In the foreground stood a wooden frame—technically termed the 'horse'—furnished with ropes, pulleys, and other accessories of torture. Beyond flamed a brazier, reflecting its red glare on the surrounding objects, and throwing into darker shadow the faces of those who stood between Coconnas and it. Against one of the pillars supporting the vaulted roof stood a man, motionless as a statue, holding in his hand a rope. You might have thought him carved in

stone, like the pillar against which he stood. Chains and gleaming blades were suspended from the walls, above the stone seats, and between the iron rings.

"Oho!" muttered Coconnas, "the hall of torture all prepared, and apparently only waiting for the victim! What is the meaning of this?"

"Down on your knees, Marc-Annibal Coconnas," said a voice, which made that gentleman raise his head, "down on your knees to hear the sentence which has just been pronounced against you."

The demand was one of those against which the whole being of the Piedmontese instinctively revolted. Two men, however, placed their hands upon his shoulders so unexpectedly and so heavily, that he fell with both knees upon the floor.

The voice continued:

"Sentence pronounced by the Court sitting within the Keep of Vincennes against Marc-Annibal de Coconnas, charged and convicted of the crime of high treason, of attempt to poison, of sorcery and magic against the person of the King, of conspiracy against the welfare of the State, as likewise of having, by his pernicious counsels, incited to rebellion a Prince of the Blood . . ."

At each of these imputations Coconnas had shaken his head, beating time, after the fashion of unruly scholars.

The Judge continued:

"In consequence whereof the aforesaid Marc-Annibal de Coconnas will be taken to the prison of Saint-Jean-en-Grève, there to be beheaded; his property will be confiscated, his high forests cut down to the height of six feet, his castles demolished, and a post erected, with a plate of copper, setting forth the crime and the punishment . . ."

"As to my head," said Coconnas, "I readily believe it will be cut off, since it is in France and exposed to great risk. As to my high forests and my castles, I defy all the saws and picks of the Most-Christian Kingdom to get their teeth into them."

"Silence!" said the Judge, and he continued:

"Further, the aforesaid Coconnas will be . . ."

"What!" interrupted Coconnas, "something more to be done to me after I am beheaded? That seems to me rather severe."

"No, sir," said the Judge; "before . . ." And he went on:

"And further the aforesaid Coconnas will, before the execution of the capital sentence, be subjected to the extraordinary torture of the ten wedges."

Coconnas leapt to his feet, withering the Judge with a flaming glance.

"And for what object?" he cried, finding no other than these simple words to express the crowd of thoughts which had just surged into his mind.

In point of fact, this torture would involve the complete overthrow of his hopes; he would not be taken to the chapel until after being tortured, and the victims of the torture often died under it, especially if they were brave and strong, since, in that case, to confess was regarded as an act of cowardice; while, if the victim did not confess, the torture continued, and that with redoubled force.

The Judge disregarded the question put by Coconnas, since the concluding words of the sentence supplied its answer; he merely continued:

"In order to force him to disclose the names of his accomplices, and to confess in detail his plots and machinations."

"Sdeath!" cried Coconnas, "I call that an infamy—nay, worse than an infamy, I call it cowardice."

Accustomed to such displays of violence on the part of victims—a violence which the pain of torture soon reduced to tears—the Judge, without the slightest emotion, merely made a gesture, whereupon Coconnas, seized by the feet and shoulders, was thrown backwards, carried off, laid upon the bed of torture, and fastened to it, without being able even to see the men who had subjected him to this violent treatment.

"Wretches!" roared Coconnas, in a paroxysm of fury, shaking the bed and trestles in such fashion as to make his torturers themselves recoil; "wretches! torture me, bruise me, crush me, annihilate me; you shall learn nothing, I pledge you my oath to that! Ah! you imagine you can make a gentleman of my quality speak by dint of bits of wood and iron! Go on; I defy you."

"Prepare to write, clerk," said the Judge.

"Yes, prepare!" roared Coconnas, "and if you write all I am going to tell you, you will have your work cut out, you infamous executioners. Write, write."

"Do you wish to make disclosures," said the Judge, in the same calm tone as before.

"Nothing, not a word ; go to the devil."

"You will reflect, sir, while the preparations are being made. Come, master, put the boots on the gentleman."

At these words, the man who had been standing motionless hitherto, with the ropes in his hand, detached himself from the pillar, and with slow steps approached Coconnas, who turned towards him to greet him with a defiant grimace.

The man was Caboche, executioner to the Provost of Paris.

A painful astonishment depicted itself on the features of Coconnas, who, instead of shouting and throwing himself about, remained motionless, as if unable to take his eyes off the face of that forgotten friend, who reappeared at such a moment.

Caboche, without betraying by the movement of a muscle the fact that he had ever set eyes on Coconnas before, inserted two boards between his legs, and fixed two similar ones on the outsides, binding the whole together with the cord which he held in his hand.

This was the apparatus called the "boots."

For the ordinary torture, six pins or wedges were driven in between the boards, which were forced apart, and bruised the flesh.

For the extraordinary torture, ten wedges were driven in, with the result that the boards not only bruised the flesh, but broke the bones.

The preliminaries accomplished, Master Caboche inserted the point of the wedge between the two boards ; then, kneeling on one knee, and holding his mallet in his hand, he looked at the Judge.

"Will you speak ?" asked the latter.

"No," replied Coconnas, firmly, though he felt the beads of perspiration on his brow, and his hair stand up on end.

"Then proceed," said the Judge ; "the first wedge of the ordinary torture."

Caboche raised his arm, and with his heavy mallet delivered a terrible blow on the wedge, which gave out a dull, heavy sound, and made the wooden "horse" tremble.

This first wedge, which usually made the most resolute victims groan, did not evoke a murmur from Coconnas—nay, further, the only expression depicted on his countenance was that of unutterable astonishment. He looked with dazed

eyes at Caboche, who, with uplifted arm, and turning half round towards the Judge, was preparing to repeat the blow.

"What was your intention in concealing yourselves in the Forest?" asked the Judge.

"To seat ourselves under the shade," replied Coconnas.

"Go on," said the Judge.

Caboche dealt a second blow, which gave a sound like the first one.

Coconnas, however, did not knit his brows any more than at the first blow, and he continued to look at the executioner with the same astonishment.

The Judge frowned.

"This is a very obdurate Christian," he muttered ; "has the wedge gone in up to the head, master ?"

Caboche stopped, as if to examine it ; but, as he stooped, he said to Coconnas, *sotto voce* :

"Why don't you cry out, simpleton ?"

Then, getting up :

"Up to the head, sir," he replied.

"The second ordinary wedge," said the Judge, coldly.

The few words whispered by Caboche explained everything to Coconnas. The worthy executioner had just rendered to *his friend* the greatest service which can be rendered to a gentleman by an executioner. He was doing more than sparing him pain ; he was saving him from the disgrace of a confession, by driving between his legs wedges of elastic leather, of which only the heads were of wood, instead of employing oaken wedges. And in addition to this, he was allowing him the means of reserving all his strength, so as to mount the scaffold with firmness.

"Ah ! good, good Caboche," murmured Coconnas, "make your mind easy ; I will cry out, since you ask me to, and so loud that, if you are not satisfied, you must be difficult to please."

Meanwhile Caboche had inserted between the boards the extremity of a wedge much thicker than the preceding ones.

"Proceed," said the Judge.

At this order, Caboche struck as though it were a question of demolishing the Castle of Vincennes at a single blow.

"Ah ! ah ! oh ! oh !" cried Coconnas, in tones of the most varied intensity. "A thousand thunders ! you are breaking my bones, for God's sake be careful !"

"Ah !" said the Judge with a smile,

"that has produced its effect; I was surprised myself before."

Coconnas breathed like the bellows of a forge.

"What were you doing in the forest?" repeated the Judge.

"Why! 'od's death! I have told you already—I was merely taking the air."

"Proceed," said the Judge.

"Confess," whispered Caboche in his ear.

"Confess what?"

"Anything you like, but confess something."

And he gave a second blow no less well applied than the former one.

Coconnas thought he would be choked by his own shouts.

"Oh! there, enough, enough!" said he. "What do you wish to know, sir? by whose order I was in the Forest?"

"Yes, sir."

"I was there by order of M. d'Alençon."

"Write that down," said the Judge.

"If I have committed a crime in deceiving the King of Navarre," continued Coconnas, "I was but a tool, sir, and was obeying my master."

The clerk began to write.

"Ah, ah! you denounced me, did you, pale-face," murmured Coconnas, "wait, wait a little."

And he related the visit of François to the King of Navarre, the interview between De Mouy and M. d'Alençon, and the story of the red cloak, all the while howling at intervals as he allowed fresh blows of the hammer to be administered.

In short, he furnished information so precise, incontestable, and damaging to the Duc d'Alençon; he contrived so well to make it appear that this information was only extracted from him by the agony of his sufferings; he grimaced, roared, and groaned so naturally and in such varied tones, that the Judge himself was terrified at last at having to register details so compromising to a son of France.

"Well, that's all right!" said Caboche, "here is a gentleman to whom one does not need to speak twice, and who can furnish ample material for the clerk. Good Lord! what would it have been, had the wedges been of wood instead of leather?"

Coconnas was accordingly spared the last wedge of the extraordinary torture; but, without reckoning that one, he had

made the acquaintance of nine others, quite sufficient to reduce his legs to a pulp.

The Judge rewarded Coconnas for his confession by treating him with considerable politeness, and then retired.

The victim remained alone with Caboche.

"Well!" asked the latter, "how do you feel, my gentleman?"

"Ah! my friend, my worthy friend, my dear Caboche!" said Coconnas, "be sure I shall be grateful all my life for what you have just done for me."

"Plague on't! sir, you are right, for if they knew what I have done for you, it would be I who would take your place on this horse, and the trick wouldn't be managed for *me* as I managed it for *you*."

"But how did you conceive the ingenious idea . . .?"

"Thus," said Caboche, as he wound some blood-stained bandages round Coconnas' legs, "I knew that you had been arrested, that your trial was proceeding, that the Queen Catherine desired your death; I guessed that you would be put to the torture and I took my precautions accordingly."

"At the risk of what might happen?"

"Sir," said Caboche, "you are the only gentleman who ever gave me his hand, and I have a heart and a memory, executioner as I am, perhaps even for that very reason. You will see to-morrow how neatly I shall do my work."

"To-morrow!"

"To-morrow, no doubt."

"What work?"

Caboche stared at Coconnas in amazement.

"What work, do you say! why, have you forgotten the sentence?"

"Ah! yes, of course, the sentence," said Coconnas, "I had quite forgotten it."

In point of fact, Coconnas had not forgotten it, but he was not thinking about it for the moment.

What he was thinking about was the chapel, the dagger hidden beneath the sacred cloth, Henriette and the Queen, the sacristy door, and the two horses waiting on the outskirts of the forest; what he was thinking about was liberty, the gallop in the free air, and safety beyond the frontiers of France.

"Now," said Caboche, "it is a question of getting you skilfully from the horse on to the litter. Don't forget that everybody, including even my own assistants, suppose that your legs are crushed, and

take care that at each movement you give a cry of pain."

"Oh! ah! oh dear!" cried Coconnas at the mere sight of the two assistants bringing the litter near him.

"Come! come! a bit of courage," said Caboche; "if you cry like that now, what will you say presently?"

"My dear Caboche, don't let me be touched, I beg you, by your estimable attendants; they might not, perhaps, be so light-handed as yourself."

"Place the litter beside the horse," said Master Caboche.

The two attendants obeyed. Caboche took Coconnas in his arms, as he would have done a child, and laid him on his back in the litter; but spite of all these precautions, Coconnas uttered fearful shrieks.

The worthy turnkey now appeared with a lantern.

"To the chapel," said he.

The bearers of the litter started after Coconnas had given Caboche a second shake of the hand.

The first hand-shake had proved too successful for him to make any difficulty henceforth about repeating it.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN THE CHAPEL

AMID the most profound silence the mournful procession crossed the two drawbridges of the keep and the great courtyard of the Castle leading to the chapel, in the painted windows of which a faint light illuminated the figures of the Apostles in their red robes.

Coconnas eagerly inhaled the night air, saturated though it was with rain. He noticed how thick was the darkness, congratulating himself that all the circumstances were favourable to their escape.

It required all his prudence and self-control to prevent him from leaping down from the litter, when, having been carried into the chapel, he saw an inert mass, shrouded in a great white mantle, lying on the floor of the choir, just in front of the high altar. This was La Mole.

The two soldiers who escorted the litter had remained outside the door.

"Since we have been granted this last favour of meeting once more," said Coconnas, with assumed feebleness of voice, "carry me close beside my friend."

The bearers, having received no orders to the contrary, made no difficulty about granting this request.

La Mole looked sad and pale, his head rested against the marble of the wall; his dark hair, bathed in perspiration, and imparting to his face the dead whiteness of ivory, seemed to be standing up on end.

At a sign from the turnkey the bearers went off to fetch the priest whom Coconnas had requested to be brought.

This was the pre-arranged signal.

Coconnas followed them anxiously with his eyes, but he was not the only one whose glance was eagerly directed towards them. Scarcely had they disappeared, when two women hurried from behind the altar, and burst into the choir with joyous murmurs, which heralded their arrival like the sultry breeze which precedes the storm.

Marguerite sprang towards La Mole and clasped him in her arms. But La Mole uttered a terrible cry—a cry resembling those which Coconnas had heard from his cell, and which had almost driven him mad.

"My God! what is the matter, La Mole?" said Marguerite, stepping back in horror.

La Mole uttered a deep groan and put his hands to his face as though to shut out Marguerite from his sight.

Marguerite was even more astonished at his silence and at this gesture than she had been at his cry of pain.

"Oh! what is the matter?" cried she, "you are covered with blood."

Coconnas, who had rushed to the altar and seized the dagger, and who was already holding Henriette in his embrace, turned round.

"Get up," said Marguerite, "get up, I entreat you! you see that the moment has come."

A smile, heart-rending in its sadness, crossed the pale lips of La Mole, who seemed destined never to smile again.

"Dear Queen!" said the young man, "you had reckoned without Catherine, and consequently without foreseeing the perpetration of an appalling crime. I have undergone the torture, my bones are broken, my whole body is nothing but one hideous sore, and the movement I

am making at this moment to place my lips to your forehead causes me pain sharper than death."

"The torture!" cried Coconnas; "why, I, too, have undergone it. Then the executioner didn't do for you what he did for me:" and Coconnas told them the whole story.

"Ah!" said La Mole, "it is easily explained: you gave him your hand that day when we paid him a visit; while I, forgetting that all men are brothers, turned up my nose. God is punishing me for my pride, and I thank Him."

La Mole clasped his hands. Coconnas and the two women exchanged glances of unspeakable terror.

"Come, come," said the turnkey, who had gone to the door to listen and had now returned, "come, don't waste time, dear Monsieur Coconnas; give me my dagger-thrust, and manage it as a gentleman should do, for they will soon be here."

Marguerite had knelt down beside La Mole, like one of those marble statues which bend over a recumbent effigy upon a tomb.

"Come, my friend, courage!" said Coconnas; "I am strong, I will carry you and set you on your horse, I can even hold you in front of me if you are unable to support yourself in the saddle. Only let us start at once; you hear what this good man says, and our lives are at stake."

La Mole made a supreme, a super-human effort.

"True," said he, "your life is at stake."

He tried to rise, while Hannibal took him under the arms and set him on his feet. La Mole uttered no sound save a sort of muffled bellow; but directly Coconnas left hold of him to go to the turnkey, and the sufferer was supported only by the arms of the two women, his legs gave way, and, spite of the efforts of the weeping Marguerite, he fell in a heap, and the piercing scream, which he could no longer restrain, rang through the chapel, its long echoes resounding along the vaulted roof.

"You see," said La Mole in accents of distress, "you see how it is, my Queen; leave me then, abandon me with a last farewell. They did not make me speak, Marguerite; so your secret remains wrapped in my love, and will perish with me. Adieu, my Queen, adieu . . ."

Marguerite, almost lifeless herself, folded in her arms that handsome head,

and imprinted on it a kiss of almost religious solemnity.

"You, Hannibal," said La Mole, "you who have been spared this agony, you who are still young and can live, fly, fly, my friend; give me the last consolation of knowing that you are at liberty."

"Time is passing," said the turnkey; "come, make haste."

Henriette tried to drag Coconnas gently away, while Marguerite, kneeling before La Mole with dishevelled hair and streaming eyes, looked a very Magdalene.

"Fly, Hannibal, fly," resumed La Mole, "do not give our enemies the joyful spectacle of the death of two innocent men."

Coconnas gently pushed back Henriette, who was pulling him towards the door, and with a gesture of such solemnity as to be majestic:

"Madame," said he, "first give this man the five hundred crowns we promised him."

"Here they are," said Henriette.

Then, turning to La Mole, and shaking his head sadly:

"As for you, good La Mole," said he, "you wrong me by thinking for a moment that I could leave you. Have I not sworn to live and to die with you? But you are in such pain, my poor friend, that I forgive you."

And lying down again resolutely near his friend, he leaned towards him and touched his forehead with his lips.

Then, gently, as a mother with her child, he drew La Mole's head along the wall and laid it on his own breast.

Marguerite, looking the picture of despair, had picked up the dagger which Coconnas had just dropped.

"Oh! my Queen," said La Mole, realising what was passing through her mind, and extending his arms towards her, "Oh! my Queen, do not forget that I am dying in order to extinguish the slightest suspicion in regard to our love!"

"But what then can I do for your sake," cried Marguerite in despair, "if I cannot even die with you?"

"You can do *this*," said La Mole, "you can make me welcome death and make it come to me as it were with smiling face."

Marguerite came close to him, clasping her hands as though to bid him speak.

"You remember that evening, Marguerite, when, in exchange for the life

which I offered you then, and which I give you to-day, you made me a solemn promise ? . . . "

Marguerite gave a start.

"Ah ! you remember it," said La Mole, "for you shudder."

"Yes, yes, I remember it," said Marguerite, "and upon my soul, Hyacinthe, I will keep my word."

And Marguerite extended her hand towards the altar, as if for the second time to invoke God as witness of her oath.

La Mole's face brightened as though a ray of sunlight had penetrated the vaulted roof and shone upon him.

"They are coming, they are coming," said the turnkey.

Marguerite uttered a cry and sprang towards La Mole, but the dread of increasing his pain arrested her, and she stood trembling in front of him.

Henriette kissed Coconnas on the brow and said to him :

"I understand, my Hannibal, and I am proud of you. I know it is your heroic spirit that makes you die, but for that heroic spirit I love you. Before God I swear that I will love you always above all else, and although I know not what it is that Marguerite has promised to do for La Mole, I swear I will do the same for you."

And she held out her hand to Marguerite.

"Thank you for your cheering words," said Coconnas.

"One last favour, my Queen, before you leave me," said La Mole : "give me some souvenir of you, which I may kiss as I am mounting the scaffold."

"Oh ! yes," cried Marguerite, "here ! . . ."

And she unfastened from her neck a little gold relic which hung from a gold chain.

"Here," she said, "this is a sacred relic which I have worn from my childhood ; my mother put it round my neck when I was quite little, and when she still loved me ; it comes from my uncle, Pope Clement, and it has never left me. Here, take it."

La Mole took it and kissed it greedily.

"They are opening the door," said the turnkey ; "fly, ladies, fly !"

The two women fled hastily behind the altar and disappeared. At the same moment the priest entered the chapel.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE PLACE DE GRÈVE

IT was seven o'clock in the morning, and already a noisy crowd was waiting in the streets and squares, and along the quays.

At ten o'clock, a tumbril—the very one in which, after their duel, the two friends had been carried in an unconscious state to the Louvre—which had set out from Vincennes that same morning, was passing slowly along the Rue Saint-Antoine, its progress being watched by a throng of spectators so closely packed they were like to squeeze each other to death. With staring eyes and parted lips they looked more like rows of graven images than living human beings.

The Queen-Mother was affording that day to the population of Paris a spectacle at once heart-rending and exciting.

Upon a heap of straw in the bottom of this tumbril, bareheaded, and dressed all in black, lay two young men. Coconnas supported on his knees the body of La Mole, whose head protruded between the cross-bars of the cart, his eyes roving vaguely to and fro.

The people, however, in their eagerness to peer into the bottom of the tumbril, pushed, squeezed, stood on tiptoe, climbing on to the posts, and clinging to the projections of the walls, not appearing satisfied until they had grasped every detail connected with the two victims whose sufferings were about to be terminated at last.

The common report ran that La Mole was dying without having confessed to a single one of the charges imputed to him ; while Coconnas, on the other hand, was declared to have been unable to endure the pain, and to have disclosed the whole plot.

Accordingly, there were heard on all sides shouts of :

"Look, look, the fair-headed one ! that's the man who spoke ; that's the one who confessed the whole story—the coward who has brought the other to his death. But *he's* a brave fellow, and never opened his lips."

These remarks of praise and abuse, which accompanied their progress, reached the ears of the young men, and

while La Mole wrung his friend's hand, a sublime contempt was depicted on the features of the Piedmontese, who looked down upon the ignorant mob from the dirty tumbril, just as he would have done from a triumphal chariot. Adversity had ennobled the features of Coconnas, even as death was about to purify his soul.

"Shall we soon be there?" asked La Mole. "I can hold out no longer, friend, and I believe I am going to faint."

"Wait, wait, La Mole, we are about to pass the Rue Tizon and the Rue Cloche-Percée; look, just look."

"Oh! lift me up, lift me up, so that I may see that blessed house once more."

Coconnas put out his hand and touched the shoulder of the executioner, who was seated in the front of the tumbril, driving the horse.

"Master," said he, "do us the kindness to stop for a moment opposite the Rue Tizon."

Caboche nodded his head, and stopped the cart on arriving opposite the Rue Tizon.

La Mole, helped by Coconnas, rose with a painful effort, looked with eyes dimmed by tears at that little house, now silent and deserted as the grave; his breast heaved a sigh, and he murmured in a low tone:

"Farewell, farewell to youth and love and life."

And he let his head sink upon his breast.

"Courage!" said Coconnas, "perhaps we shall find all these things again yonder."

"Do you think so?" murmured La Mole.

"I think so because the priest has assured me of it, and even more because I hope it. But do not faint, my friend, for these wretches who are gaping at us would jeer at us."

Caboche heard these last words, and, whipping up his horse with one hand, with the other he held out to Coconnas, in such a way that nobody could see it, a little sponge, saturated with so powerful a revulsive, that La Mole, after inhaling it, and rubbing his temples with the sponge, found himself refreshed and revived.

"Ah!" said La Mole, "I feel revived," and he kissed the relic, which hung from his neck by a gold chain.

On reaching the angle of the quay, and as they turned past the charming little

building erected by Henri II, they perceived the scaffold, consisting of a bare platform raised to a height which overlooked the heads of the spectators.

"My friend," said La Mole, "I should be glad to be the first to die."

Coconnas touched the executioner on the shoulder for the second time.

"What is it, my gentleman?" asked the latter, turning round.

"My worthy fellow," said Coconnas, "you would like to please me, would you not? you told me so, at least."

"Yes, and I repeat it."

"My friend here has suffered more than I have, and consequently is less strong . . ."

"Well?"

"Well, he tells me that he couldn't endure to see me die. Besides, if I were to die first, he would have nobody to carry him on to the scaffold."

"Very well," said Caboche, wiping away a tear with the back of his hand, "make your mind easy; it shall be as you wish."

"And you will do it with a single blow, will you not?" said the Piedmontese, in a low tone.

"Yes, a single blow."

"Good . . . if you *should* make a mistake, make it with *me*."

The tumbril stopped; they had arrived. Coconnas placed his hat on his head.

A sound like that of waves beat upon La Mole's ears. He tried to rise, but his strength failed him, and Caboche and Coconnas were obliged to support him by holding him beneath the arms.

The Place was thronged with heads, the steps of the Hôtel de Ville were like an amphitheatre peopled with spectators; every window was filled with eager faces.

On seeing this handsome young fellow, unable to support himself on his crushed legs, make a supreme effort to mount the scaffold by himself, a universal shout of horror was raised. The men roared, the women uttered plaintive moans.

"He was one of the chief dandies of the Court," said the men, "and ought to have been executed at the Pré-aux-Clercs, and not at Saint-Jean-en-Grève."

"How handsome he is! and how pale!" said the women; "that is the one who didn't confess."

"Friend," said La Mole, "carry me; I cannot hold up."

"Wait," said Coconnas.

He signed to the executioner, who moved out of the way; then, stooping down, he took La Mole in his arms as he would have done a child, and, never staggering beneath his load, mounted the stairs to the platform, where he laid La Mole down, amid the frantic shouts and applause of the populace.

Coconnas raised his hat above his head and bowed. Then he threw it down beside him on the scaffold.

"Look round," said La Mole; "do you not see them anywhere?"

Coconnas turned his eyes slowly all round the Square, and on reaching a particular point, stopped, and, without removing his eyes, touched La Mole on the shoulder.

"Look," said he; "look at the window of that little turret."

And with his other hand he pointed to the little building which exists to this day between the Rue de la Vannerie and the Rue du Mouton, a relic of past ages.

Two women dressed in black were standing, each supporting the other, not in the window itself, but a little way behind it.

"Ah!" said La Mole, "I was only afraid of one thing, of dying without seeing her again. I have seen her; I can die."

And, with his eyes fixed eagerly on the little window, he lifted the relic to his mouth and covered it with kisses.

Coconnas bowed to the two ladies with the same grace as if he had been in a drawing-room.

In response to this signal, they waved their handkerchiefs, all soaked with tears.

Caboche, in his turn, now touched Coconnas on the shoulder, and gave him him a meaning glance.

"Yes, yes," said the Piedmontese.

Then, turning to La Mole:

"Embrace me," said he, "and die courageously; it will not be difficult for you, who are so brave."

"Ah!" said La Mole, "I am in such pain that it will be no credit to me to die courageously."

The priest approached, and held out a crucifix to La Mole, who smilingly showed him the relic he held in his hand.

"No matter," said the priest; "still ask for strength from Him who suffered as you are about to do."

La Mole kissed the feet of the Christ.

"Command me," said he, "to the

prayers of the Ladies of the Blessed Virgin."

"Make haste, make haste, La Mole," said Coconnas; "you make me suffer so much, that I feel my strength going."

"I am ready," said La Mole.

"Can you keep your head quite straight?" said Caboche, getting ready his sword behind La Mole, who was kneeling.

"I hope so," said the latter.

"Then all will be well."

"But you," said La Mole, "you won't forget what I asked you; this relic will open all doors to you."

"Make your mind easy. But just try and keep your head straight."

La Mole stretched out his neck, and turning his eyes to the little turret:

"Farewell, Marguerite," said he; "bless . . ."

He did not finish the sentence. With a rapid sweep of his gleaming sword, Caboche at one blow struck off his head, which rolled at the feet of Coconnas.

The body extended itself gently, as though lying down to sleep.

A cry rose from a thousand throats, and amid all those women's voices Coconnas thought he distinguished one cry more agonised than all the rest.

"Thank you, my worthy friend, thank you," said Coconnas, for the third time extending his hand to the executioner.

"My son," said the priest to Coconnas, "have you nothing to confide to God?"

"Faith, no, father," said Coconnas. "Anything which I might have had to tell Him I told to yourself yesterday."

Then, turning to Caboche:

"Come, executioner, the last friend I have left me, you have but one favour more to do me." And, before kneeling down, he directed towards the crowd a glance so calm and serene that a murmur of admiration came to flatter his ears and gratify his pride. Then, pressing his friend's head between his hands, and imprinting a kiss on the purple lips, he threw a last glance at the turret; and, kneeling down, holding the while that beloved head between his hands:

"Now," said he.

He had hardly uttered the word before Caboche had severed his head from his body.

The final blow once struck, a convulsive trembling seized the worthy executioner.

"It is time it was ended," murmured he; "poor lad!"

And he drew with difficulty the gold relic from La Mole's clenched hand; then threw his cloak over the melancholy spoils which he had to carry back with him in the tumbril.

The spectacle was over and the crowd melted away.

CHAPTER XXX

THE TOWER OF THE PILLORY

NIGHT had descended upon the city, still shuddering at the news of this execution, the details of which ran from mouth to mouth, and cast a gloom in every house over the merriment of the evening meal.

In striking contrast with the silence and gloom of the town, the Louvre, brilliantly lighted up, was full of uproar and gaiety. A great fête was taking place at the Palace; a fête ordered by King Charles for that evening at the same moment that he had given instructions that the executions should be carried out in the morning.

The Queen of Navarre had received, on the previous evening, the Royal command to be present at this fête, and, in the hope that La Mole and Coconnas would have made their escape during the night, as well as in the conviction that all proper steps had been taken to ensure their safety, had answered her brother that she would comply with his desire. Now, however, that the scene in the chapel had robbed her of all hope, now that, in obedience to a last sentiment of pity for him whose love for her was the greatest and most profound which she had experienced in her life, she had been a witness of the execution, she had assured herself that neither prayers nor threats should induce her to be present at a joyful fête in the Louvre on the same day that she had witnessed an entertainment of so lugubrious a character in the Place de Grève.

King Charles had that day afforded a fresh proof of that power of will which nobody, perhaps, carried to such lengths as he did. Confined to his bed for the

past fortnight, weak as a man at the point of death, and pallid as a corpse, he had nevertheless risen at five o'clock, and dressed himself in his most sumptuous robes. It is true that he had fainted thrice during the operation.

Towards eight o'clock he inquired for his sister, and asked if she had been seen, or if anyone knew what she was doing. Nobody could give him an answer; for the Queen had gone into her apartments at about eleven in the morning and shut herself up, giving strict orders that her privacy should not be disturbed.

To Charles, however, there was no such thing as a closed door. Leaning on the arm of M. de Nancey, he made his way to the Queen's apartments, and entered suddenly by the door in the secret corridor.

He had steeled himself for a sad spectacle; yet the reality was even more lamentable than he had imagined. Marguerite, stretched almost lifeless on a couch, with her head buried in the cushions, neither wept nor prayed, but had lain since her return like one in the throes of mortal agony.

In another corner of the room, Henriette de Nevers, that woman usually so intrepid, lay extended on the carpet, motionless and unconscious. Like Marguerite, her strength had deserted her on her return from the execution, and poor Gillonne was going in turns from one to the other, not daring to address a word of comfort to either.

In the crises which follow great catastrophes, we hoard our grief as the miser does his treasure, and regard as an enemy the person who attempts to rob us of even the smallest portion of that grief.

Charles pushed the door open, and leaving Nancey in the corridor, entered, pale and trembling.

Neither of the two women noticed him. Gillonne, who at the moment was attending to Henriette, rose from her knees, and looked at the King in alarm. Charles made a movement with his hand, and Gillonne gave a curtsey and withdrew.

The King then stepped up to Marguerite, looked at her in silence for a moment, and presently, in a tone of which his harsh voice might have been thought incapable:

"Margot! my sister!" he said.

Marguerite gave a start, and sat up.

"Your Majesty!" she exclaimed.

"Come, courage, my sister!

Marguerite raised her eyes to the sky.

"Yes," said Charles, "I know, but listen to me."

The Queen of Navarre conveyed by a sign that she was listening.

"You promised me that you would come to the ball," said Charles.

"I!" cried Marguerite.

"Yes, and having promised, you are expected; and if you don't come, surprise will be expressed at your absence."

"Forgive me, brother," said Marguerite; "you see I am very unwell."

"Make an effort over yourself."

Marguerite seemed for a moment tempted to summon up her courage, but suddenly abandoning the attempt, and letting her head sink back upon the cushions:

"No, no" she said, "I will not go."

Charles took her hand, seated himself on the sofa, and said to her:

"You have just lost a friend, Margot, I know; but look at me, have I not lost all my friends, and, what is more, my mother! You have always been able to weep at your ease as you are doing at this moment; while I have been ever obliged to smile, even in the hour of my greatest griefs. You are suffering, but look at me! I am dying. Well, come, Margot, have courage! I ask you to do so, my sister, in the name of our honour. We carry, as a painful cross, the reputation of our House; let us carry it as the Saviour bore His to Calvary; and if, like Him, we fall down on the road, let us rise again, as He did, with courage and resignation."

"Oh! my God, my God!" cried Marguerite.

"Yes," said Charles, in answer to her thoughts, "yes, the sacrifice is hard, my sister; but everyone has his sacrifice to make, some of their honour, others of their lives. Do you imagine that I, only four and twenty, and ruler of the fairest kingdom upon earth, do not regret having to die? Well, look at me . . . my eyes, my complexion, my lips are those of a dying man, it is true; but my smile . . . would not my smile make people think that I had hope? And yet, in a week, a month at most, you, my sister, will weep for me as you do for him who died this morning."

"My brother! . . ." cried Margot, throwing her arms round the King's neck.

"Come, dress yourself, Margot dear," said he; "conceal your paleness and appear at the ball. I have just ordered some new jewellery and ornaments worthy of your beauty to be brought to you."

"Oh! what do diamonds and robes matter to me now!" said Marguerite.

"Life is long, Marguerite," said Charles with a smile, "for you at least."

The pages retired, Gillonne alone remained.

"Prepare all I require for dressing, Gillonne," said Marguerite.

"Never! never!"

"My sister, remember one thing: sometimes we best honour the dead by concealing, or rather by dissimulating, our grief."

"Well, Sire," said Marguerite, with a shudder, "I will go."

A tear, which soon died on his feverish cheek, bedimmed the eye of Charles.

He stooped forward and kissed his sister on the forehead, stopped for a moment in front of Henriette, who had neither seen nor heard him, and said.

"Poor woman!"

Then he went out silently.

Several pages now entered, carrying caskets and chests.

Marguerite signed to the pages to place them on the floor.

Gillonne looked at her mistress with an air of astonishment.

"Yes," said Marguerite, in tones the bitterness of which cannot be described, "yes, I am going to dress and to attend the ball; they are expecting me, so make haste! The day will have been complete; a fête at the Place de Grève this morning, a fête at the Louvre to-night."

"And Madame la Duchesse?" said Gillonne.

"Oh! she! she is very fortunate; she can remain here and weep to her heart's content. She is not a King's daughter, a King's wife, a King's sister. She is not a Queen. Help me to dress, Gillonne."

The girl obeyed. The jewels were superb, the dress magnificent. Never had Marguerite looked so lovely.

She looked at herself in a mirror.

"My brother is quite right," said she, "and human beings are very miserable creatures."

At this moment Gillonne came back.

"Madame," she said, "a man is asking to see you."

"To see me?"

"Yes, you."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know, but he has a dreadful look about him, and the mere sight of him is enough to make anyone shudder."

"Go and ask him his name," said Marguerite, turning pale.

Gillonne went away and came back after a few moments.

"He will not tell me his name, Madame, but he begged me to hand you this."

Gillonne held out the relic which Marguerite had given La Mole the evening before.

"Oh! bid him enter," said the Queen, quickly, turning even paler than before.

A heavy footstep shook the floor and a man appeared on the threshold.

"You are . . . ?" said the Queen.

"The man whom you met one day near Montfaucon, Madame, and who brought back in his cart two wounded gentlemen to the Louvre."

"Yes, yes, I remember you, you are Master Caboche."

"Executioner to the Provost of Paris, Madame."

These were the only words heard by Henriette of all that had been spoken in the room for the last hour. She withdrew her hands from her pale face and looked at the executioner with her emerald eyes, which seemed to flash fire.

"And you come . . . ?" said Marguerite, trembling.

"You remember the promise given to the younger of the two gentlemen, the one who charged me to deliver this relic to you. You remember it, Madame?"

"Ah! yes, yes," cried the Queen, "and never did a more noble and generous heart better deserve its reward; but where is it?"

"With the body, at my house."

"At your house? why have you not brought it?"

"Because I might have been stopped at the wicket of the Louvre and obliged to open my cloak; what would they have said, had they seen a head beneath it?"

"True; keep it at your house; I will come to-morrow to fetch it."

"To-morrow, Madame," said Master Caboche, "it will perhaps be too late."

"How so?"

"Because the Queen-Mother has ordered me to keep for the purpose of her cabalistic experiments the heads of the next two criminals beheaded by me."

"Oh! what profanation! the heads of our beloved ones? Henriette," running to her friend, whom she found standing up as though some spring had impelled her to her feet; "Henriette, my angel, do you hear what this man says?"

"Yes. Well, what must we do?"

"We must go with him."

Then, uttering one of those shrieks of anguish which in moments of horror bring us back to life:

"Ah! I was so happy," she said; "I was almost dead."

Meanwhile, Marguerite was throwing a velvet mantle over her bare shoulders.

"Come, come," she said, "we shall see them again once more."

Marguerite had all the doors closed, and ordered her litter to be brought round to the little private door; then, taking Henriette under her arm, she went down by the secret passage, motioning to Caboche to follow them.

Marguerite's bearers were men whom she could trust, deaf and dumb where the affairs of their mistress were concerned, and safer than if they had been beasts of burden.

The litter proceeded for about ten minutes, preceded by Master Caboche and his servant, who carried a lantern; then it stopped. The executioner opened the gate while the servant ran on in front.

Marguerite descended and helped the Duchesse de Nevers to alight. Under the pressure of this great sorrow, by which both were affected, it was Marguerite's more delicate organisation which proved itself the stronger of the two.

The Tower of the Pillory rose in front of the two women like some sombre and shapeless giant, emitting a reddish light which streamed from two openings near its summit.

The servant reappeared at the door.

"You can enter, ladies," said Caboche, "everyone in the tower is asleep."

At the same instant the light from the two loopholes was extinguished.

The two women, pressing closely together, passed under a small door with a pointed arch, and stepped in the darkness along a damp and uneven stone floor. At the end of a winding corridor they perceived a light, and, guided by the uncouth owner of the abode, moved in its direction. The door was closed behind them.

Caboche, holding a wax taper in his

hand, conducted them into a low, smoky apartment. In the middle of the room was a table, on which were the remains of a supper laid for three persons. These three were, no doubt, the executioner, his wife, and his chief assistant.

In a conspicuous place a parchment sealed with the King's seal was nailed to the wall. This was the gallows-warrant.

In a corner was a broad, long-hilted sword. This was the flaming sword of justice.

Here and there were some clumsy pictures representing Saints being put to death by various forms of torture.

Arrived at this room, Caboche made a low reverence.

"Your Majesty will pardon me," said he, "for daring to enter the Louvre and to bring you here. But it was the gentleman's last and express wish, so that I was obliged . . ."

"You have done well, Master Caboche, you have done well," said Marguerite, "and here is wherewith to reward your zeal."

Caboche looked sadly at the purse swollen with gold which Marguerite had just laid on the table.

"Gold, always gold!" he murmured. "Alas! Madame, that I cannot myself redeem with the price of gold the blood that I have been compelled to shed this day!"

"Master," said Marguerite, with painful hesitation, and glancing around her, "Master, have we yet to go somewhere else? I do not see . . ."

"No, Madame, no, they are here; but the sight is a melancholy one, and one which I would fain spare you by bringing concealed in a cloak what you have come to fetch."

Marguerite and Henriette looked at one another simultaneously.

"No," said Marguerite, reading in her friend's glance the same resolve which she herself had just formed, "no; show us the way and we will follow you."

Caboche took the taper, opened an oak door, which disclosed a staircase of several steps, leading underground. At the same instant a passing current of air made the sparks fly from the taper and wafted into the Princesses' faces the sickening odour of damp and blood.

Henriette, who was white as a statue of alabaster, leaned on the arm of her

friend so as to walk more firmly, but on the first stair she tottered.

"Oh! I can never face it," she said.

"When one loves truly, Henriette," replied the Queen, "one ought to love until death."

It was a sight terrible, and at the same time pathetic, that of these two women, resplendent with youth, beauty and rich apparel, stooping beneath the low-browed, whitewashed vault, the feeble of them clinging to the stronger, and the stronger supported by the arm of the common executioner.

They reached the lowermost step. At the extremity of the underground chamber lay two human forms covered with a broad sheet of black serge.

Caboche raised a corner of the covering, held down his taper, and said:

"Look, Madame."

The two young men in their black garments lay side by side in that awful symmetry produced by death. Their heads, once more united to their bodies, seemed to be separated from them merely by a circle of bright red in the middle of the neck. Death had not unclasped their hands, for, whether by accident or by the pious care of the executioner, La Mole's right hand rested in the left hand of Coconnas.

A look of love was depicted on the features of La Mole, a smile of disdain on those of Coconnas.

Marguerite knelt beside her lover, and with her bejewelled hand gently lifted that head so beloved by her.

As for the Duchesse de Nevers, she leaned against the wall, unable to remove her gaze from that pale face in whose features she had so often sought love and happiness.

"La Mole! dear La Mole," murmured Marguerite.

"Hannibal! Hannibal!" cried the Duchesse de Nevers; "so handsome, so proud, so brave, you have no word now to say to me! . . ."

And a torrent of tears rained from her eyes.

This woman, so haughty, so intrepid, so insolent in her happiness, this woman who pushed her scepticism to the point of absolute unbelief, and her passion to the point of cruelty—this woman had never thought of death.

Marguerite set her the example of action.

In a satchel, embroidered with pearls, and scented with the finest perfumes, she placed La Mole's head, looking handsomer than ever against the velvet and gold. Its beauty would be preserved by means of a special preparation employed at that period in embalming the bodies of Royal personages.

Henriette approached in her turn, and wrapped the head of Coconnas in a corner of her cloak.

Then both of them, bowed down much more by grief than by their burden, mounted the stairs with a final glance at the remains which they were leaving to the mercy of the executioner in that gloomy lodging of vulgar criminals.

"Do not fear, Madame," said Caboche, who understood the meaning of that glance; "the gentlemen shall be shrouded and buried with all due solemnity, I swear it."

"And you will purchase Masses for them with this," said Henriette, detaching from her neck a magnificent ruby necklace, and handing it to the executioner.

They returned to the Louvre in the same way as they had left it. At the wicket the Queen revealed her identity; at the foot of the private staircase she alighted, returned to her apartments, deposited her mournful relic in the closet adjoining her bedchamber, destined henceforth to become an Oratory, left Henriette to keep guard in her room, and at ten o'clock, looking paler and more beautiful than ever, entered the grand ball-room, the same hall in which, some two years and a half before, the first chapter of our story opened.

All eyes were directed towards her, and she bore their gaze with a proud and almost joyous air, sustained by the thought that she had religiously fulfilled her friend's last wish.

Charles, on seeing her, staggered through the gilded throng which surrounded him.

"Sister," said he, aloud, "I thank you."

Then, *sotto voce* :

"Take care," said he; "there is a spot of blood upon your arm . . ."

"Ah! what matter, Sire," said Marguerite, "so long as I have a smile upon my lips!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE SWEAT OF BLOOD

SOME days after the terrible incident just related—that is to say, on the thirtieth of May, 1574—the Court being now at Vincennes, a loud noise was heard of a sudden in the chamber of the King, who, having become much worse during the ball which he had insisted on giving on the very day of the execution of La Mole and Coconnas, had come, by order of the physicians, into the country for purer air.

It was eight in the morning. A small group of Courtiers was holding an animated conversation in the ante-chamber, when, suddenly, a cry resounded, and the King's nurse appeared on the threshold of the room, her eyes bathed in tears, and crying in a voice of despair :

"The King! help! help!"

"Is his Majesty worse, then?" asked Captain de Nancey, whom the King had, as we have seen, released from all obedience to the commands of Queen Catherine, in order to attach him to his own person.

"Oh! the blood! the blood!" said the nurse.

"The physicians! call the physicians!"

Mazille and Ambroise Paré used to relieve one another in turns at the august patient's bedside, and Ambroise Paré, who was then on duty, having seen the King go off to sleep, had taken advantage of this opportunity in order to slip away for a few minutes.

Meanwhile, the King had been seized with a copious perspiration; and, a relaxation of the capillary vessels having produced hemorrhage of the skin, this sweat of blood had alarmed the nurse, who was unable to become used to the strange phenomenon, and who, being, as you remember, a Protestant, told herself each time it occurred that it was the blood of the Huguenots shed on St. Bartholomew's day which thus in vengeance demanded the blood of the King.

The Courtiers rushed out in all directions; the doctor could not be far away, and they could not fail to meet him. The ante-chamber therefore remained empty,

everybody wishing to show his zeal by bringing the physician back with him.

At this moment a door opened and Catherine appeared. She crossed the ante-chamber rapidly, and entered her son's apartment with an eager step.

Charles was lying back upon the bed, his eyes dull, his chest heaving; a red sweat trickled from every part of his body; one of his hands hung down outside the bed, and at the end of each of the fingers trembled a drop of blood, like a liquid ruby. It was a horrid sight.

At the sound, however, of his mother's footsteps, and as though he had recognised them, Charles sat up.

"Pardon me, Madame," said he, looking at his mother, "but I would fain die in peace."

"Die of a passing attack of this evil malady!" said Catherine. "Why do you throw us into despair, my son, like this?"

"I tell you, Madame, that I feel my life slipping away. I tell you, Madame, that this is death . . . I feel what I feel, and I know what I am saying."

"Sire," said Catherine, "your disturbed imagination is the gravest symptom of your malady; now that those two sorcerers and assassins, La Mole and Connnas, have met with the punishment they so richly deserved, your physical sufferings ought to have diminished. The mental mischief alone persists, and, if I could speak with you for only ten minutes, I could prove to you . . ."

"Nurse," said Charles, "guard the door and let no one enter; Queen Catherine de' Medici would speak to her beloved son Charles."—The nurse obeyed his orders.

"Yes, I know," continued Charles, "this conversation was bound to take place one day or another, so better to-day than to-morrow. Besides, to-morrow may, perhaps, be too late. Only, it were well that a third person should be present at the interview."

"And why?"

"Because, I repeat, I am at the point of death," replied Charles, with a terrible solemnity; "because at any moment Death may come into this room, pale and silent, and unannounced, as you did. It is time then, as I put my personal affairs in order last night, to put the affairs of the Kingdom in order this morning."

"And who is the person that you wish to see?" asked Catherine.

"My brother, Madame; let him be summoned."

"Sire," said the Queen, "I rejoice to see that your denunciations of him, dictated far less by hatred than dragged from you by suffering, are being effaced from your mind and will soon be effaced from your heart. Nurse, nurse!" cried Catherine.

The good woman, who was keeping guard outside, opened the door.

"Nurse," said Catherine, "when M. de Nancey comes, tell him, by my son's order, to go in search of the Duc d'Alençon."

Charles made a sign which stopped the nurse as she was retiring.

"I said my brother, Madame."

Catherine's eyes dilated like those of an angry tigress. But Charles raised his hand with an imperative gesture.

"I wish to speak to my brother Henri," said he. "Henri is the only brother I have; I don't mean the one who is King over yonder, but the one who is a prisoner here. Henri shall learn my last wishes."

"And what of me!" cried Catherine, with a boldness unusual with her when opposed by that iron will of her son's, yet carried beyond her habitual pretence of submission by her hatred for the Béarnais; "if you are so near the grave, as you say you are, do you think that I will yield to anyone, especially to a stranger, my right as a mother, my right as Queen, to be with you in your last moments?"

"Madame," said Charles, "I am still King; I still give orders here: I tell you I would speak to my brother Henri, and you do not summon my Captain of the Guard? . . . A thousand devils, I warn you I have strength enough left to go and fetch him for myself." And so saying, he made a movement as if to jump from the bed.

"Sire," cried Catherine, holding him back, "you are wronging all of us: you forget the affront you offer to your family in repudiating those of your own blood. None but a Son of France should kneel beside the death-bed of a King of France. As for myself, my place here is assigned by the laws, both of nature and etiquette; I shall therefore remain."

"And by what title do you remain, Madame?" asked Charles.

"By the title of mother."

"You are no more my mother, Madame, than the Duc d'Alençon is my brother."

"You are raving, Sire; since when has she, who gave birth to her son, ceased to be his mother?"

"Since the moment, Madame, when that unnatural mother destroyed the life which she gave," answered Charles, wiping away the blood-stained froth which surged to his lips.

"What do you mean, Charles? I do not understand you," faltered Catherine, staring at her son with eyes dilated by astonishment.

"You will understand me presently, Madame."

Charles felt beneath his pillow and drew from it a small silver key.

"Take this key, Madame, and open my travelling-chest; it contains papers which will speak on my behalf."

Charles pointed with his hand to a superbly carved chest, fastened with a silver lock, which occupied the most conspicuous place in the room.

Catherine, overpowered by her son's dominating influence, obeyed, walked with slow steps towards the chest, opened it, looked inside, and suddenly recoiled as though she had seen some reptile lying coiled within its recesses.

"Well," said Charles, who had not taken his eyes off her, "What is there in the chest that alarms you, madame?"

"Nothing," said Catherine.

"In that case, Madame, put your hand in and take out a book: there should be a book, there, I fancy," added Charles, with that smile on his pale lips which was more terrible than a threat from anyone else.

"Yes, there is a book," stammered Catherine.

"A treatise on venery."

"Yes."

"Take it, and bring it to me."

Catherine, spite of her self-confidence, turned pale, trembled in every limb, and diving with her hand inside the chest:

"It is fate!" she murmured, as she took out the book.

"Good," said Charles, "Now listen: this work on venery . . . I was foolish . . . I loved the chase beyond everything . . . this book on venery, I read too much of it; do you understand, Madame? . . ."

Catherine uttered a low groan.

"It was a weakness on my part," continued Charles; "burn it, Madame! the weaknesses of Princes must not become public property!"

Catherine went to the fire-place, let the book fall into the middle of the hearth, and remained standing, silent and motionless, with dull eyes, watching the blue flames devour the poisoned leaves. As the book burned, a powerful alliaceous odour, as of strong garlic, began to pervade the whole chamber. Presently the book was entirely consumed.

"And now, Madame," said Charles, with an irresistible majesty of tone, "call my brother."

Catherine, struck with stupor, overwhelmed by a complexity of emotions, which her profound sagacity could not analyse, and which her almost superhuman fortitude could not combat, took a step forward, and tried to speak.

The mother felt remorse; the Queen felt terror; the poisoner felt only a return of hatred.

The last of these emotions dominated all the others.

"Curse him!" she cried, rushing out of the room, "he triumphs, he gains his ends; yes, curse him!"

"You hear me, it is my brother, my brother Henri," cried Charles, shouting after his mother; "my brother Henri to whom I wish to speak this very instant with regard to the Regency of the Kingdom."

Almost at the same moment, Master Ambroise Paré entered by a door opposite to the one by which Catherine had just gone out, and pausing on the threshold to sniff the fetid atmosphere of the room:

"Why, who has been burning arsenic?" he asked.

"I have," replied Charles.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE TERRACE OF THE KEEP OF VINCENNES.

MEANWHILE Henri of Navarre, alone and wrapped in thought, was pacing the terrace of the Great Keep; he knew that the Court was

lodged within the Castle a hundred paces away from him, and his piercing eyes seemed to penetrate its walls and see Charles lying within upon his death-bed.

The sun blazed in a clear sky, flashing upon the distant plains, and flooding with liquid gold the summits of the forest trees, now glorying in the wealth of their early foliage. Even the grey stones of the dungeon seemed to be steeped in the warmth of the sunshine, and the wall-flowers, transplanted by the breath of the wind into the crannies of the walls, opened their discs of red and yellow velvet to the kisses of a warm breeze.

But Henri's gaze was not fastened on those verdant plains, nor on those gilded tree-tops; it soared beyond the intermediate space, and travelled beyond, to fix itself with eager ambition upon the capital of France, destined one day to become the capital of the world.

"Paris," murmured the King of Navarre, "yonder lies Paris; that is to say, joy, triumph, glory, power and happiness; Paris, in which is the Louvre, and the Louvre, in which is the throne; and to think that one thing alone separates me from that Paris, so desirable and so ardently desired! . . . these stones that I tread under my feet, and which hold within their circuit both me and her who is my enemy."

Withdrawing his gaze from Paris to Vincennes, he perceived on his left, in a valley sheltered by flowering almond-trees, a man on whose cuirass a ray of sunshine played, his every movement making the cuirass a dancing point of flame.

This man was mounted on a highly-mettled steed, and was holding beside him a second animal, which appeared to be equally spirited.

The King of Navarre fixed his gaze on the horseman, and saw him draw his sword from the scabbard, pass its point through his handkerchief, and wave it as if by way of a signal.

At the same instant, a similar signal was repeated on the hill opposite, then a girdle, as it were, of handkerchiefs fluttered round the castle.

These signals were being made by De Mouy and his Huguenots, who, knowing the King to be dying, and fearing lest some attempt should be made against Henri, had mustered, and were holding themselves in readiness for defence or attack.

Henri directed his glance upon the horseman whom he had seen first, and, leaning over the parapet, shaded his eyes with his hands to shut out the glare of the sun's rays, and recognised the young Huguenot.

"De Mouy!" he cried, as if the latter could hear him.

And in his joy at seeing himself thus surrounded by friends, he, too, raised his hat and waved his scarf.

All the white streams fluttered again with an eagerness which evinced the delight of those who waved them.

"Alas! they are waiting for me," said he, "and I cannot join them . . . Why didn't I do so when I had the chance, perhaps! . . . Now I have delayed too long."

And he made them a gesture of despair, to which De Mouy replied by a signal which conveyed the meaning: "I will wait."

At this moment Henri heard the sound of footsteps on the stone stairs. He withdrew quickly. The Huguenots understood the cause of his retreat; the swords were replaced in the scabbards and the handkerchiefs disappeared.

Henri saw emerging from the stairs a woman, whose panting breath denoted with what speed she had come, and recognised, not without that secret terror he always experienced at the sight of her, Catherine de' Medici.

Behind her walked two guards who halted at the top of the stairs.

"Oho!" murmured Henri, "something fresh and important must have happened for the Queen-Mother to come like this to look for me on the terrace of the Keep of Vincennes."

Catherine sat down on a stone seat adjoining the battlements to recover breath. Henri approached her, and with his most gracious smile:

"Is it I whom you are seeking, my good mother?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied Catherine, "I wished to give you a final proof of my attachment to you. We are on the point of a crisis; the King is dying and wishes to speak to you."

"To me!" said Henri, starting with joy.

"Yes, to you. He has been told, I am certain of it, that not only do you regret the throne of Navarre, but that you are even ambitious of the throne of France."

"Oh!" said Henri.

"That is not the case, I know, but *he* believes it, and no doubt the sole object of the conversation he wishes to have with you is to set a trap for you."

"For me?"

"Yes. Charles, before he dies, wants to know what he has to fear or to hope from you; and on your answer, mark you, to his offers, will depend the final orders that he may give, that is to say, your death or your life."

"But what should he offer me, then?"

"How do I know! impossibilities, probably."

"But can you make no guess, my mother?"

"No; but I suppose, for instance . . ."

"What?"

"I suppose that, thinking you to hold these ambitious views of which he has been told, he wishes to have from your own mouth the proofs of your ambition. Suppose he tempts you as criminals were once tempted, in order to elicit a confession without recourse to torture; suppose,"—continued Catherine, looking fixedly at Henri—"that he should offer you some position of authority, the Regency even."

An unspeakable joy pervaded Henri's careworn breast; but he divined the blow, and his vigorous and supple spirit recoiled from the thrust.

"The Regency to me?" said he, "the snare would be too clumsy; the Regency to me, when there are you and my brother, D'Alençon."

Catherine pressed her lips tight to conceal her satisfaction.

"Then you renounce the Regency?" said she, eagerly.

"The King is dead," thought Henri, "and it is she who is setting the trap."

Then aloud:

"I must first hear what the King of France says," he replied, "for, by your own confession, Madame, all that we have said is based merely on guesswork."

"No doubt," said Catherine; "but still you can answer as to your intentions."

"Why, 'faith!' said Henri, innocently, "having no claims, I have no intentions."

"That is no answer," said Catherine, feeling that time pressed, and letting anger get the better of her; "declare yourself in one way or another."

"I cannot declare myself upon mere supposition, Madame; a definite resolve is a thing so difficult, and above all, so

serious to form, that I must wait for actual facts."

"Listen, sir," said Catherine, "there is no time to lose, and we are wasting it in vain discussion and mutual finesse. Let us play our game as King and Queen. If you accept the Regency, you are a dead man."

"The King still lives," thought Henri.

Then aloud:

"Madame," said he, with firmness, "God holds in His hands the lives of men and of princes. He will inspire me how to speak. Let his Majesty be told that I am ready to present myself before him."

'Reflect, sir.'

"In the two years during which I have been proscribed, and the month during which I have been in prison," answered Henri, gravely, "I have had time for reflection, Madame, and I have reflected. Have the goodness, therefore, to go first to the King, and tell him that I am following you. These two worthies," said Henri, pointing to the soldiers, "will see that I do not escape: besides, I have no intention of doing so."

There was such firmness in Henri's tone that Catherine saw that all her attempts, in whatever form they might be disguised, would make no impression upon him, and accordingly she went down the stairs precipitately.

As soon as she had disappeared, Henri ran to the parapet and conveyed to De Mouy a signal which meant: "Come close and hold yourself in readiness for any event."

De Mouy, who had dismounted, sprang to the saddle, and, with the second horse which he was leading, galloped up, and stationed himself almost within musket-shot of the Keep.

Henri thanked him by a gesture, and descended the steps.

On the first landing he found the soldiers waiting for him. A double guard of Swiss and Light Horse was posted at the entrance to the courtyards; to enter or to leave the castle one had to pass between two ranks of halberdiers.

Here Catherine had stopped, and was waiting for Henri. She motioned to the soldiers who were following him to withdraw, and laying a hand on his arm:

"This courtyard has two gates," she said; "at this one, which you see in the rear of the King's apartments, a good

horse and liberty await you if you decline the Regency; at that one, through which you have just passed, if you listen to the promptings of ambition . . . What say you?"

"I say that if the King makes me Regent, Madame, it is I who will give the soldiers their orders, and not you. I say that, if I quit the Castle at night, all these pikes, halberds, and muskets will be lowered before me."

"Madman!" muttered Catherine in her fury, "believe me, you had better not play this terrible game of life and death with Catherine."

"Why not?" said Henri, looking hard in her face: "why not with you as well as with another, since I have had the best of the game so far?"

"Go to the King since you will believe nothing, and listen to nothing," said Catherine, pointing to the staircase with one hand, while with the other she fingered one of two poisoned daggers which she carried in that historic case of black shagreen.

"After you, Madame," said Henri, "so long as I am not Regent, the right of precedence belongs to you."

Catherine, foiled in all her plans, did not attempt to contest the point, but led the way.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE REGENCY

THE King was beginning to grow impatient; he had summoned M. de Nancey to his bed-chamber, and had just ordered him to go and fetch Henri, when the latter appeared. On seeing his brother-in-law at the door, Charles uttered an exclamation of joy, while Henri stood terrified, as though he had found himself face to face with a corpse.

The two doctors who were at the bedside withdrew, as did also the priest who had just been exhorting the unhappy Prince to make an end befitting a Christian.

Charles was not loved, yet there was much weeping in the anti-chambers. At the death of Kings, whatever may have

been their character, there are always those who have something to lose, and fear lest they may not find that something under those who succeed to the throne.

The signs of mourning, the sobbing, the words of Catherine, the ill-omened and majestic accompaniments of the last moments of a King—the sight of that King himself, the victim of a malady of which similar cases have occurred in later times, but of which no example had hitherto been furnished by science—all these things produced upon Henri's youthful, and therefore still impressionable mind, an effect so terrible that, spite of his resolve not to cause Charles any fresh anxiety as to his condition, he was unable, as we have said, to repress the feeling of terror which depicted itself on his countenance when he perceived the dying King all streaming with blood.

Charles gave a sad smile. Nothing escapes the dying of the impressions produced on those by whom they are surrounded.

"Come in, Henriot," said he, holding out his hand to his brother-in-law, and speaking with a gentleness which Henri had never seen in him before; "come in, for it was grieving me not to have seen you; I have worried you a good deal during my life-time, my poor friend, and I reproach myself for it now, believe me. Sometimes I have joined hands with others who were persecuting you; but a King is not master of events, and besides, my mother Catherine, and my brother D'Alençon, there were reasons of State which, while I lived, pressed heavily upon me, though now, when at the point of death, they have ceased to trouble me."

"Sire," stammered Henri, "I no longer recall anything save the love I have always cherished for my brother, the respect which I have always cherished for my King."

"Yes, yes, you are right, Henriot," said Charles, "and I am grateful to you for speaking thus; for in truth you have suffered much during my reign, not to mention that it was during my reign that your poor mother died. But you must have seen that I was often urged on by others. Sometimes I resisted, sometimes I yielded through sheer weariness. But, as you say, let us speak no more of the past; it is the present about which I am concerned; it is the future which alarms me."

And with these words the poor King covered his pale face with his emaciated hands.

Then, after, a moment's silence, shaking his brow to dispel his gloomy thoughts and sprinkling a dew of blood all round him :

"We must save the State," he continued, in a low voice and bending towards Henri, "we must prevent it from falling into the hands of fanatics or women."

Charles, as we have just said, uttered these words at most in a whisper, and yet Henri fancied he heard a low exclamation of anger proceed from behind the bed. Perhaps some opening contrived in the wall, the existence of which was unknown to Charles himself, was allowing Catherine to overhear this final conversation.

"Women?" replied the King of Navarre, in order to elicit an explanation.

"Yes, Henri," said Charles, "my mother desires to hold the Regency until my brother of Poland returns. But mark what I say to you, he will never return."

"What! not return?" cried Henri, his heart leaping violently with joy.

"No, he will not come back," continued Charles, "his subjects will not allow him to go."

"But don't you think, my brother," said Henri, "that the Queen-Mother has written to him beforehand?"

"Yes, but Nancey has overtaken the courier at Château-Thierry, and brought me back her letter; in that letter she told him I was dying. But I also have written to Warsaw; my letter will get there, I am certain, and my brother will be placed under guard. So, in all probability, Henri, the throne is going to be vacant."

A second sound, more audible than the first, was heard in the recess.

"Undoubtedly she is there," said Henri to himself; "she is listening, she is waiting!"

Charles heard nothing.

"Now," continued he, "I am dying without heirs male."

Then he paused; a gentle thought seemed to light up his features, and laying his hand on the King of Navarre's shoulder :

"Alas! do you remember, Henriot," he continued, "do you remember that poor little child I showed you one even-

ing sleeping in his silken cradle, and watched over by an angel? Alas! Henriot, they will kill him! . . ."

"O Sire," cried Henri, his eyes bedimmed with tears, "I swear to you before God that my days and nights shall be spent in watching over his life. Give me your orders, my King."

"Thank you, Henriot, thank you," said the King, with a tenderness foreign to his disposition, but imparted to him by the situation. "I accept your word. Don't make a king of him—happily he is not born to a throne—but make a happy man of him. I leave him an independent fortune; may he have his mother's nobility of heart. Perhaps it would be better were he destined for the Church; he would not be so much an object of fear. Oh! I think I should die, if not happy, at least with my mind at rest, if I had the child's caresses, and the sweet face of the mother to comfort me."

"Sire, can you not bring them here?"

"Why! wretched man! if they came to this Castle, they would never be allowed to leave it again. See the position of Kings, Henriot; they can neither live nor die as they like. But I feel more easy after the promise you have given me."

Henri reflected.

"Yes, no doubt I have promised, Sire, but shall I be able to fulfil my promise?"

"What do you mean?"

"Shall not I myself be proscribed, menaced like him, nay, even more so? For I am a man, while he is but a child."

"You are mistaken," answered Charles; when I am dead, you will be strong and powerful, and here is what will give you strength and power."

At these words the dying King drew a parchment from beneath his pillow.

"Take it," said he.

Henri glanced over the document, to which was appended the royal seal.

"The Regency to me, Sire!" said he, turning pale with joy.

"Yes, the Regency to you, until the return of the Duc d'Anjou, and as, in all probability, the Duc d'Anjou will never return, it is not the Regency which this document confers on you, but the throne."

"The throne, to me!" murmured Henri.

"Yes," said Charles, "to you, the only man worthy, and above all, the only man fit to govern these dissolute gallants

these abandoned women, who live by blood and tears. My brother D'Alençon is a traitor, he will be a traitor to you also. Leave him in the prison to which I sent him. My mother would like to kill you; banish her. My brother of Anjou, in three months, four months, a year perhaps, will leave Warsaw and come to dispute your authority; answer him by a bull from the Pope. I have negotiated this business through my ambassador, the Duc de Nevers, and you will receive the bull immediately."

"Oh! Sire!"

"Fear one thing only, Henri, and that is Civil War. But by remaining a convert, you will avoid it, for the Huguenot Party is disunited, unless you put yourself at its head, and M. de Condé is not strong enough to contend against you. France is a land of plains, Henri, and consequently a Catholic country. The King of France should be King of the Catholics and not King of the Huguenots; for the King of France must be the King of the Majority. They say I feel remorse for the Massacre of St. Bartholomew; doubts as to its wisdom, yes,—but remorse, no. They say that I am rendering back the blood of the Huguenots through all my pores. I know what I am rendering back: it is arsenic, and not blood."

"Oh! Sire, what are you saying?"

"Nothing. If my death is to be avenged, Henriot, it must be avenged by God alone. Let us speak of it no further than to foresee the events that will ensue from it. I bequeath to you a good Parlement, a tried army. Rely on their support for resisting your only foes—my mother and the Duc d'Alençon.

At this moment, the hollow ring of weapons and the sound of military words of command were heard in the vestibule.

"I am a dead man," muttered Henri.

"You fear, you hesitate," said Charles, uneasily.

"I! Sire," replied Henri; "no, I neither fear nor hesitate; I accept."

Charles pressed his hand. At this moment the nurse came to the bed-side with a draught which she had just prepared in the neighbouring room, unheeding of the fact that the destinies of France were being decided within three yards of her.

"Call my mother, good Nurse," said Charles, "and tell them to summon M. d'Alençon as well."

CHAPTER XXXIV

"THE KING IS DEAD: LONG LIVE THE KING!"

CATHERINE and the Duc d'Alençon, livid with fear, and trembling with fury at the same time, entered a few minutes later. As Henri had conjectured, Catherine knew all, and had told it in a few words to François. They advanced into the room a few steps, and stood waiting.

Meantime Henri was standing beside the King's pillow, as Charles announced to them his will and pleasure.

"Madame," said he, to his mother, "had I a son, you should be Regent, or, failing you, the King of Poland, or, failing the King of Poland, my brother François should be Regent; but I have no son, and after me the throne belongs to my brother, the Duc d'Anjou, who is absent. As he will come some day or other in order to claim this throne, I do not wish him to find a man occupying the regency, who, possessing rights almost equal to his own, might contest his claim, and consequently expose the Kingdom to a war between rival candidates. That is why I do not choose you, Madame, as Regent, for you would have to choose between your two sons, which would be painful to the feelings of a mother. That is why I do not choose my brother François, since he might say to his elder brother: You had a throne; why did you leave it? No; I choose, therefore, a Regent who can take the crown as deposited with him in trust, and who will keep it under his hand, and not wear it on his head. This Regent—salute him, Madame; salute him, my brother—is the King of Navarre!" And, with a supreme gesture of command, he saluted Henri with his hand.

Catherine and D'Alençon made a movement which was something between a salute and a start of agitation and disappointment.

"See, Monseigneur," said Charles to the King of Navarre, "here is the instrument which gives you, until the return of the King of Poland, the command of the

armies, the keys of the treasury, and the sovereign powers and rights."

Catherine glanced angrily at Henri; François seemed so staggered that he could hardly stand. But this weakness on the part of the one, and this firmness on the part of the other, instead of reassuring Henri, showed him the danger that was imminent.

He made, nevertheless, a determined effort over himself, and, getting the better of his fears, took the roll of parchment from the King's hands; then, drawing himself up to his full height, he looked fixedly at Catherine and François, as much as to say:

"Beware, I am now your master."

Catherine understood the meaning of this glance.

"No, no," she said; "never shall my family bow to that of a stranger; never shall a Bourbon reign in France so long as there remains a Valois."

"My mother," cried Charles, starting up in his bed, with its reddened sheets, and looking more terrible than ever, "take care; I am still King. Not for long, as I well know; but it does not take long to give an order; it does not take long to punish murderers and poisoners."

"Well! give that order, if you dare. I am going to give *mine*. Come, François, come."

And she went out hurriedly, dragging the Duc d'Alençon along with her.

"Nancey!" cried Charles, "here, here! Nancey, I order you to arrest my mother, arrest my brother, arrest . . ."

A gush of blood cut short the King's words, just as the Captain of the Guard opened the door, and Charles sank back choking and exhausted upon the bed.

Nancey had heard only his own name; the order which had followed it, less audibly uttered, did not reach his ear.

"Guard the door," said Henri, "and let no one enter."

Nancey bowed and went out.

Henri glanced at the King, who was to all appearance dead, save that a slight breathing disturbed the froth that fringed his lips.

He gazed at him for some moments; then, speaking to himself:

"The supreme moment has arrived," said he; "am I to reign, am I to live?"

At the same instant, the curtain of the alcove was raised, a pale face appeared from behind it, and a voice rang out amid

the deathly silence which reigned in the Royal chamber:

"Live!" said the voice.

"René!" cried Henri.

"Yes, Sire."

"Your prediction, then, was false: I shall not be King?" he cried.

"You shall be King, Sire; but the hour has not yet come."

"How do you know that? Speak, that I may know if I am to believe you."

"Listen."

"I am listening."

"Stoop down."

Henri and René bent over towards one another, separated only by the width of the bed, while between them lay, speechless and motionless, the dying King.

"Listen," said René. "Sent here by the Queen-Mother to destroy you, I choose to do you a service rather, because I have faith in your horoscope. On my serving you depend my bodily interests, and my soul's salvation as well."

"Did the Queen-Mother also bid you tell me that?" asked Henri, whose mind was filled with painful doubts.

"No," said René, "but listen to a secret."

And bending forward still further, Henri followed his example, so that their two heads almost touched one another.

There was in this conversation between two men stooping over the body of a dying Monarch something so appalling that the hair of the superstitious Florentine stood on end, and the perspiration bathed Henri's forehead.

"Listen," continued René, "listen to a secret known to me alone, which I will reveal to you alone, if you will swear on the body of this dying man to pardon me your mother's death."

"I have promised you that once already," said Henri, the expression of his features becoming more stern.

"You have promised, but you have not sworn it," said René, drawing back somewhat.

"I swear it," holding out his right hand above the King's head.

"Well, then, Sire," said the Florentine, hurriedly, "the King of Poland is close at hand!"

"No," said Henri, "the messenger was stopped by King Charles."

"King Charles stopped one messenger on the way to Château-Thierry; but the Queen-Mother, in her foresight,

dispatched three messengers by different routes."

"Oh! woe is me!" said Henri.

"A messenger arrived this morning from Warsaw. The Duc d'Anjou started close after the messenger without anyone thinking of opposing his departure, for the King's illness was not known at Warsaw. The messenger is only a few hours in advance of Henri d'Anjou."

"Oh! if I had but a week!" said Henri.

"Yes, but you have only a few hours. Did you hear the sound of arms just now?"

"Yes."

"They are preparing to attack you; they will come and kill you here, even in the King's chamber."

"The King is not dead yet."

René looked fixedly at Charles.

"He will be dead in ten minutes: you have ten minutes, perhaps less, to live."

"What must I do, then?"

"You must fly without losing a minute, a second even."

"But which way can I escape? If they are waiting for me in the ante-chamber, they will kill me as I go out."

"Listen; I will risk everything for your sake, and you must never forget it."

"Make your mind easy on that score."

"Follow me by the secret passage, I will lead you to the postern-gate. Then, in order to give you time, I will go and tell the Queen-Mother that you are coming down; you will be thought to have discovered this secret passage and taken advantage of it to effect your escape. Come, come."

Henri stooped towards Charles and kissed him on the forehead.

"Adieu, my brother," said he, "I shall never forget that your last wish was that I should succeed you; that your last desire was to make me king. Die in peace. In the name of my brethren, I forgive you the blood you have shed."

"Quick! quick!" said René, "he is recovering consciousness; escape this instant, before he opens his eyes."

"Nurse! nurse!" murmured Charles.

Henri snatched from the bedside the sword henceforth useless to the dying King, thrust into his bosom the parchment constituting him Regent, kissed Charles on the forehead once again, crossed to the other side of the bed, and

rushed through the opening, closing it behind him.

"Nurse! nurse!" cried the King, in somewhat louder tones.

The good woman ran in.

"Well! my Charlot, what is it?" she asked.

"Nurse," said the King, his eyes assuming a rigid fixity dreadful to behold, "something must have happened while I was asleep: I see a dazzling light—I see God—I see Jesus—I see the Blessed Virgin. They are supplicating Him for me; the Lord Almighty pardons me . . . He calls me . . . O God! O God! receive me with Thy mercy . . . O God! forget that I was a King, for I come to Thee without crown or sceptre . . . O God forget the crimes of the King, and remember but the sufferings of the man . . . O God! I come to Thee!"

And Charles, who, as he pronounced these words, had raised himself higher and higher, as though to meet the Voice that summoned him, heaved a sigh, and fell back rigid and motionless into his Nurse's arms.

Meanwhile, and as the soldiers, under Catherine's orders, stationed themselves at the spot where Henri would come out, the latter, guided by René, passed through the secret corridor and reached the postern-gate, mounted the horse that was awaiting him, and rode off to the place where he knew he should find De Mouy.

Suddenly, at the sound of his horse's hoofs ringing on the stones, some sentinels turned round and shouted:

"He is escaping! he is escaping!"

"Who is escaping?" cried the Queen-Mother, rushing to a window.

"King Henri, the King of Navarre!" cried the sentinels.

"Shoot him down, shoot him down!" said Catherine.

The sentinels took aim, but Henri was already out of range.

"He flees!" cried the Queen-Mother, "then he is defeated."

"He flees!" murmured the Duc d'Alençon, "then I am King."

But at the same instant, and while François and his mother were still at the window, the drawbridge creaked beneath the feet of horses, and, to the accompaniment of the clank of arms and the shouts of voices, a young man, followed by four gentlemen, covered, like himself, with

sweat and dust and foam, galloped into the courtyard, crying: "*France!*"

"My son!" cried Catherine, extending her arms to him through the window.

"Mother!" answered the young man, leaping from his horse.

"My brother of Anjou!" cried François, in amazement, and stepping backwards.

"Is it too late?" asked Henri d'Anjou of his mother.

"No, on the contrary, you are in time, and had God led you by the hand He could not have brought you more opportunely; look and listen."

In point of fact, M. de Nancey, Captain of the Guard, was just stepping on to the balcony of the King's chamber.

All eyes were turned towards him.

Breaking a wand into two pieces, and, with extended arms, holding a piece in either hand:

"King Charles IX. is dead! King Charles IX. is dead! King Charles IX. is dead!" he shouted thrice.

And he let the two pieces of the wand fall to the ground.

"Long live King Henri III.!" cried Catherine, crossing herself with pious gratitude. "Long live King Henri III.!"

The cry was repeated by all, with the exception of the Duc d'Alençon.

"Ah! she has tricked me," said he, tearing his breast with his nails.

"I have won the day," cried Catherine, "and that hateful Béarnais will never reign!"

CHAPTER XXXV

EPILOGUE

A YEAR had elapsed since the death of Charles IX. and the advent to the throne of his successor.

King Henri III., reigning happily by the grace of God and of his mother Catherine, had gone on a grand procession in honour of Our Lady of Cléry. He had set out on foot with his Queen and the entire Court.

King Henri III. could well afford himself this pastime; no serious cares occupied his thoughts at the moment.

The King of Navarre was in Navarre, where he had so long desired to be, and was much taken up, so it was said, with a beautiful girl of the blood of the Montmorencys, and whom he called "*La Fosseuse.*" Marguerite was with him, sad and sombre, and finding in the contemplation of the grand mountains of her husband's country, we cannot say forgetfulness, but, at any rate, some assuaging of the two great griefs which had come into her life—exile and bereavement.

Paris was very calm and peaceful, and the Queen-Mother, veritably Regent now that her dear son Henri was King, resided there, sometimes at the Louvre, sometimes at the Hôtel de Soissons, which was situated on the spot occupied at the present day by the *Halle au Blé*, and of which there remains no vestige save the graceful column which every Parisian is familiar with.

Catherine was very busy one evening in studying the stars with René, whose small acts of treachery she had consistently ignored, and who had been restored to her favour in consideration for the false testimony which he had given so adroitly in the nick of time in the matter of Coconnas and La Mole, when word was brought her that a man who had something of the utmost importance to communicate was waiting in her Oratory.

She went down hurriedly and found De Maurevel.

"*He* is here," exclaimed the former Captain of the Petardiens, not leaving Catherine time to address him first, as etiquette required.

"*He!* who?" asked Catherine.

"Who should it be, Madame, if not the King of Navarre?"

"*Here!*" said Catherine, "here . . . he . . . Henri . . . and what has he come for, the imprudent man?"

"If appearances are to be trusted, he has come to see Madame de Sauve; nothing more. If one goes by probabilities, he has come to conspire against the King."

"And how do you know he is here?"

"I saw him yesterday enter a house, and a moment afterwards Madame de Sauve joined him there."

"Are you sure it was he?"

"I waited until he came out, that is to say, for a good part of the night. At three o'clock the two lovers left the house. The King escorted Madame de

Sauve as far as the wicket of the Louvre, where, thanks to the porter, who no doubt is in her interests, she entered without being put to any inconvenience, while the King came away humming a tune and with a step as careless as if he were in his own mountains."

"And where did he go?"

"To the sign of the *Belle-Etoile* in the Rue de l'Arbre-Sec, the same hostelry where those two sorcerers, whom your Majesty had executed last year, used to lodge."

"Why did you not come and tell me this at once?"

"Because I wasn't yet certain of my facts."

"While now?"

"Now, I am certain of them."

"You have seen him?"

"Exactly. I lay in hiding at a wine shop directly opposite, and saw him again go into the same house as the evening before; then, as Madame de Sauve was late, he was imprudent enough to show his face at a window on the first floor, and this time I had no longer the least doubt. Besides, a moment later, she came and joined him once more."

"And do you think they will stay there until three in the morning, as they did last night?"

"Probably."

"Where is this house?"

"Near the Croix-des-Petits-Champs, towards Saint-Honoré."

"Very well," said Catherine. "Does M. de Sauve know your handwriting?"

"No."

"Sit down there and write."

Maurevel obeyed, and taking a pen:

"I am ready, Madame," said he.

Catherine dictated as follows:

"While Baron de Sauve is on duty at the Louvre, his wife is with a lover of hers in a house near the Croix-des-Petits-Champs, towards Saint-Honoré; the Baron will recognise the house by a red cross which will be drawn on the wall."

"Well?" asked Maurevel.

"Make a second copy of that letter," said Catherine.

Maurevel obeyed without demur.

"Now," said the Queen, "have one of these letters delivered by a trusty man to Baron de Sauve, and tell the man to drop the other in one of the corridors of the Louvre."

"I do not understand," said Maurevel.

Catherine shrugged her shoulders.

"You do not understand that a husband who gets a letter like that will be angry?"

"But it seems to me, Madame, that he was not angry with the King of Navarre in the old days."

"What is forgiven to a King is not forgiven perhaps to an ordinary gallant. Besides, if he is not angry, you must be angry instead of him."

"I?"

"Certainly. You take four men, six if necessary, you mask yourselves and burst open the door as if you were agents of the Baron, you surprise the lovers in the middle of their love-making, and kill them in the King's name; next day, the letter dropped in the corridor of the Louvre, and picked up by some kind friend who will already have made its contents public, will testify to the fact that the husband has avenged himself. Only, as chance wills it, this lover is the King of Navarre; but who could have foreseen that, when everyone imagined him to be at Pau?"

Maurevel looked at Catherine with a glance expressive of his admiration for her fertility of resource, then bowed and went out.

Meanwhile, Madame de Sauve had reached the little house at the Croix-des-Petits-Champs.

Henri was waiting for her with the door ajar.

As soon as he saw her on the staircase:

"You have not been followed?" he asked.

"Why, no," said Charlotte, "not that I am aware of, at least."

"The reason why I ask is, that I believe I was followed, not only last night, but this evening as well."

"Heavens! you alarm me, Sire; if your kind remembrance of an old friend should bring you to any harm, I should never console myself."

"Set your mind at rest, my sweet," said Henri, "we have three swords watching yonder in the shadow."

"Three is a very small number."

"They are quite enough when those swords are in the hand of De Mouy, Saucourt, and Barthélemy."

"De Mouy is with you in Paris, then?"

"Certainly."

"He has dared to return to the capital? Then he has, like you, some poor woman who is madly in love with him?"

"No, but he has an enemy whose death he has sworn. It is only hatred, my dear, which makes people commit as great follies as love does,"

"Thank you, Sire!"

"Oh!" said Henri, "I am not speaking of *present* follies, but of follies past and to come. But let us not discuss the point; we have no time to waste."

"You are still resolved to go?"

"This very night."

"Then the business on which you returned to Paris is accomplished?"

"I only returned in order to see *you*."

"You Gascon!"

"By the Lord! my sweet, I am telling *you* the truth. But a truce to these bickerings; I have still two or three hours in which to be happy, and then comes our eternal separation."

"Ah! Sire," said Madame de Sauve, "it is only my love that is eternal."

Henri had just said that there was no time for discussion, so he didn't argue the point; he accepted the statement, or, at any rate, sceptic though he was, he pretended to believe it.

Meanwhile, as the King of Navarre had said, De Mouy and his two companions were concealed in the neighbourhood of the house.

It had been arranged that Henri should leave it at midnight instead of at three o'clock; that he should escort Madame de Sauve to the Louvre, as he had done the previous evening, and should go on from there to the Rue de la Cerisaie, where Maurevel lived.

It was only during this very day that De Mouy had been able to ascertain the house in which his enemy lived.

They had been waiting for about an hour, when they saw a man, followed at a short distance by five others, go up to the door of the little house and try several keys in succession.

On seeing this, De Mouy, who was concealed in a neighbouring doorway, spring out of his hiding-place, and seized this man by the arm.

"Stop!" said he, "you must not go in there."

The man started backwards and, as he did so, his hat fell to the ground.

"De Mouy de Saint-Phale!" he cried.

"Maurevel!" roared the Huguenot, raising his sword. "I was looking for you; you have come to meet me, thank you!"

But his wrath did not make him oblivious of Henri's safety; and turning towards the window, he whistled in the peculiar way the shepherds of Béarn use.

"That will be sufficient," said he to Saucourt. "Now, then, assassin, come on!"

And he rushed upon Maurevel.

The latter had had time to draw a pistol from his belt.

"Ha!" said the King's butcher, taking aim at De Mouy, "this time you are a dead man, I fancy."

And he pulled the trigger. De Mouy, however, flung himself to the right, and the bullet whizzed harmlessly past him.

"My turn now," said the young man.

And he lunged at Maurevel so violently that, although the point of the sword struck his leather belt, it went right through it, and penetrated his body.

The assassin uttered a shriek of such agony that the hired bravos who were with him thought he was wounded mortally, and fled in terror in the direction of the Rue Saint-Honoré.

Maurevel was not a brave man. Seeing himself deserted by his men and with an adversary like De Mouy before him, he in his turn endeavoured to take flight, and made off in the same direction, shouting: "Help!"

De Mouy and his two companions, carried away by their excitement, dashed in pursuit.

As they turned down the Rue de Grenelle, with the object of heading off the fugitives, a window was thrown open and a man sprang from the first floor to the ground, which was wet with a recent shower of rain. It was Henri.

De Mouy's whistle had warned him of some danger, and the report of the pistols, proclaiming that the danger was serious, had brought him to the succour of his friends.

Sword in hand, he rushed with impetuous vigour on their tracks. A shout guided him; it came from the *Barrière des Sergents*. This shout was uttered by Maurevel, who, finding himself hotly pressed by De Mouy, for the second time called for help to his panic-stricken followers.

He was now compelled either to turn round or to be stabbed from behind. Facing round, Maurevel encountered his opponent's steel, and immediately dealt him such a skilful thrust that his scarf was

pierced by it. But De Mouy replied instantaneously; the sword buried itself once more in the flesh which it had already penetrated, and blood now streamed from both the wounds.

"Wounded!" cried Henri, who had now reached the spot; "at him! De Mouy, at him!"

De Mouy required no encouragement.

He rushed upon Maurevel afresh; but the latter did not wait for him.

Holding his left hand over the wound, he resumed his desperate course.

"Kill him quick! kill him!" cried the King; "there are his soldiers stopping, but brave men make no account of the despairing acts of cowards."

Maurevel, panting and bleeding, suddenly dropped from exhaustion; but he rose again instantly and turning on one knee, presented the point of his sword to De Mouy.

"My friends!" cried Maurevel, "there are only two of them: fire, fire at them!"

In point of fact, Saucourt and Barthélemy had gone off in pursuit of the two bravos, who had run down the Rue des Poulies, and the King and De Mouy now found themselves confronted by four opponents.

"Fire!" Maurevel continued to shout, while one of his men actually levelled his musket.

"Yes, but first," said De Mouy, "die, traitor and assassin!"

And seizing Maurevel's sword with one hand, with the other hand he plunged his own blade through his opponent's breast with such force that he pinned him to the ground.

"Look out! look out!" cried Henri.

De Mouy sprang backwards, leaving his sword in Maurevel's body, for one of the soldiers was sighting his musket and was on the point of shooting him down at close range. But at this moment Henri drove his sword through the body of the soldier, who uttered a cry and fell close to Maurevel. The two others took to their heels.

"Come! De Mouy, come!" shouted Henri. "Don't let us lose a moment; if we are recognised, we are undone."

"Wait a moment, Sire; do you think I am going to leave my sword behind in that scoundrel's body?"

And he approached Maurevel, who was lying apparently unable to stir; but just as De Mouy seized the hilt of his

sword, Maurevel rose to his feet, armed with the musket which the soldier had let fall, and shot De Mouy through the heart at point blank range. The young man fell without even uttering a groan; he was stone dead.

Henri rushed at Maurevel; but the latter had fallen in his turn, and it was but a corpse that Henri's sword pierced.

Flight was imperative; the uproar had attracted a crowd, the night-watch might arrive on the scene at any moment. Henri searched among the crowd to find a face he knew, and suddenly uttered an exclamation of delight. He had just recognised Master La Hurière.

This scene having taken place at the foot of the Croix-du-Traboir, that is to say just opposite the Rue de l'Arbre Sec, our old acquaintance, whose naturally gloomy disposition had been further saddened to a remarkable degree since the death of La Mole and Coconnas, his much-loved guests, had left his fire and his saucepans with which he was at that moment preparing the King of Navarre's supper, and had run to the spot.

"My dear La Hurière, I commend De Mouy to your care, though I much fear that nothing can be done for him. Take him to your house, and if he still lives, spare no expense to recover him; here is my purse. As for the other man, leave him in the gutter to rot like a dog."

"But what about yourself?" said La Hurière.

"I have a farewell to make. I will run and be back with you in ten minutes. Have my horses ready."

Henri started to run in the direction of the little house at the Croix-des-Petits-Champs; but on turning out of the Rue de Grenelle, he stopped short in sudden fear. A crowd was assembled in front of the door.

"What has been happening in that house?" asked Henri.

"Oh!" replied the man to whom the question was addressed, "a sad misfortune, Monsieur. A beautiful young woman has just been stabbed by her husband, who had received a note warning him that his wife was in the company of a lover."

"And the husband?" cried Henri.

"He has escaped."

"The wife?"

"She lies there."

"Dead?"

"Not yet; but nearly so, thank God."

"Oh!" cried Henri, "surely I am accursed!" And he rushed into the house.

The chamber was filled with people who surrounded a bed on which lay the unhappy Charlotte, transfixed with two dagger-thrusts.

Her husband, who for two years had concealed his jealousy of Henri, had seized this opportunity of being revenged on her.

"Charlotte! Charlotte!" cried Henri, making his way through the crowd, and falling on his knees beside the bed.

Charlotte opened her lovely eyes, now grown misty in death; she uttered a cry which caused the blood to stream from her wounds, and making an effort to raise herself:

"Oh! I was sure," said she, "that I should not die without seeing him again."

And, as though she had but been waiting for that moment in order to surrender to Henri that soul which he had loved so fondly, she pressed her lips to the King's forehead, murmured once more, and for the last time: "I love you," and fell back dead.

Henri could not remain long without dire risk. Drawing his dagger, he cut off a tress of those fair locks which he had so often unbound in order to admire their length, and went out, sobbing bitterly. Many of the bystanders, who had no suspicion of the rank of the sufferers, were likewise in tears.

"My life, my love," cried Henri, distractedly, "everything and everybody forsakes me; I have lost all at one blow!"

"Yes, Sire," whispered a man who had withdrawn from the group of spectators in front of the little house, and who had followed him; "but you still have the throne."

"René!" cried Henri.

"Yes, Sire, René, who watches over your safety. The wretch, Maurevel, uttered your name as he expired. It is known that you are in Paris, and they are searching for you. Flee, flee."

"And you say I shall be King, René! I, who am a fugitive."

"Look, Sire," said the Florentine, pointing to a star just emerging brilliantly from behind a dark bank of cloud; it is not I who say so; it is yonder star.

Henri heaved a sigh, and disappeared into the darkness

*" Here's to my
Jolly Good Health,*



and to the Source of it"

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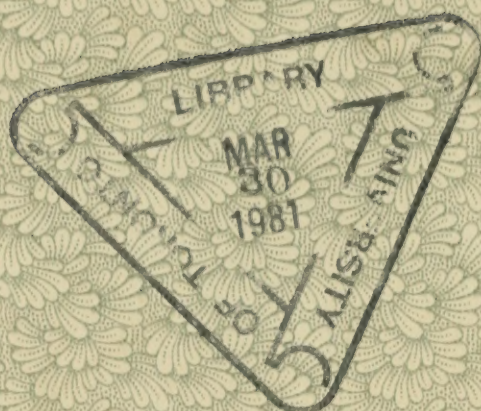
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